



THE POETRY PROJECT NEWSLETTER #269

EDITORS | Kay Gabriel, Imani Elizabeth Jackson, Bianca Messinger, Morgan Vö

ART EDITOR | Dave Morse

COVER ART | “midnight shadow” by Sarah Kirby

DESIGN | Morgan Vö

CONTRIBUTORS | Desi Agader, Terrence Arjoon, W.C. Bamberger, James Barickman, Maxine Chernoff, Donna Dennis, Katie Ebbit, Anjali Emsellem, John Godfrey, Rob Halpern, Ann Lauterbach, Kirby Chen Mages, Amanda Monti, Vani Natarajan, Zach Ozma, imogen xtian smith, Brian Stevens, Steven Taylor, Rebecca Teich, Anne Waldman, Lillian Paige Walton, Simone White, George Wilkerson, Trevor Winkfield

COPY EDITORS | James Barickman, Sam White

STAFF | Sasha Banks, Kyle Dacuyan, Will Farris, Kay Gabriel, Laura Henriksen, Roberto Montes, Nicole Wallace

AUDIO/TECH MANAGERS | James Barickman, Matt D’Angelo

BOARD OF DIRECTORS | Ricardo Maldonado (chair), Délana R.A. Dameron, Boo Froebel, Molly B. Gross, Deepali Gupta, Vincent Katz, Annabel Lee

Editor’s Note

Kay Gabriel

One link between the pieces collected in this issue of the *Poetry Project Newsletter* is a sense of being impatiently fixed in place. Anjali Emsellem, introducing a series of currently incarcerated poets, suggests that the “relationality of building a writing structure” can push past prison regulations—like book bans, censorship of organizers like Pennsylvania’s Stevie Wilson, or restrictions on receiving mail—that aim “to block intimate communication and collaboration.” Emsellem’s suggestion rhymes with the claim that Rob Halpern explores in his review of Emily Abendroth’s *Sousveillance Pageant*: that a poetry wherein “the unrecognizable and the over-the-top converge” pierces the “realism” of the prison. What else shakes us loose from being so ruinously stuck wherever we are?

Maybe experimentation. “We can’t know what these experimental drugs will do to the children!” Zach Ozma mock-shrieks in his review of Stephen Ira’s *Chasers*. “Oh, she’s experimenting with gender. He’s experimenting with men. She’s experimenting with women. It’s normal to experiment! They’re experimenting with hormones. Think of it as a sexual experiment! This is too experimental. It’s kind of a social experiment.” And then, more seriously: “The experiment reaches forward, seeks to know more, seeks a different condition and so creates it.” Rebecca Teich explores Stacy Szymaszek’s experiments with rewriting Pasolini, which, in a sense, aim to free the writer from being fixed in a highly gendered timeline: “Szymaszek inverts the paradigm of the childish adult to reveal the unique nonconformity of the adult-like child. The nonlinear interplay between childhood, gender nonconformity, and queerness reveals this cruel world in which such children are viewed as ‘both a threat and in need of protection’ while simultaneously obscuring and denying children’s autonomy.” Ozma and Teich converge on language’s slippery playfulness to break *something* free, and I think Simone White does something similar in her ekphrastic riff on a murderous history’s art record: “This was supposed to be an art historical joke about Washington’s balls.”

It’s summer—maybe, like Ozma says, the “summer of the chaser”—so here’s a word about love as well. Pride Sunday, Octo Octa and Eris Drew played back to back at the Knockdown Center; for me, the set peaked when the two lover-collaborators played the Fatback Band’s “Spread Love” for a delirious half hour. *I’m here to spread love all over the world, right here, right now*, like it’s good news, a political program, or a mass social experiment not in private longing but collective life. In a vulnerable essay on Sara Dosa’s documentary *Fire of Love*, James Barickman recalls asking the director what making her film taught her about love. The film follows the French volcanologist couple Katia and Maurice Krafft over their two decades spent chasing eruptions, capturing footage of lava flows and developing the science to enable mass evacuation plans. Barickman writes: “There’s a laugh, a rustle of bemused film bros permeating the theater. But Dosa regards my question with sincerity. While maintaining constant—dare I say, burning—eye contact, the director explains that the film has taught her how to live & die with meaning.” That feels dramatic, but no more so than the political moment and its fever pitch of emergency—*right here, right now*—which the issue’s essays and poems in some sense are all responding to. Get into it.

contents

2 REMEMBRANCES | Kenward Elmslie (1929–2022)

5 INTERVIEW | Amanda Monti *by Lillian Paige Walton*

7 POETRY | Simone White

8 PORTFOLIO | I am climbing the stairs that I create... *poems from PEN America's Prison and Justice Writing Program*

11 ESSAY | Grails on Fire // In the Heat of the Knight *by James Barickman*

13 POETRY | Terrence Arjoon

14 REVIEWS | *The Pasolini Book* by Stacy Szymaszek (review by Rebecca Teich), *Villainy* by Andrea Abi-Karam (review by Vani Natarajan), *Sousveillance Pageant* by Emily Abendroth (review by Rob Halpern), *Chasers* by Stephen Ira (review by Zach Ozma), *Phone Bells Keep Ringing for Me* by Choi Seungja (review by imogen xtian smith), *book of the other: small in comparison* by Truong Tran (review by Kirby Chen Mages), *Young Americans* by Jacqueline Frost (review by Katie Ebbit)



Kenward Elmslie (1929–2022)

W.C. Bamberger

The first Elmslie I read was *Circus Nerves*; the first-ever line, “They advanced towards Point A, / their malicious grandfather.” “Ancestor Worship” safaried on from that point, shifting from technical jargon, to cartoonish expression, and more—insert exponent here—ending with the safari-nauts being consumed by giant insects. The poem was funny and absolutely not; was serious but self-mocking. I recognized “Elmslie” when, a few months later, I saw *The Orchid Stories*. Now, forty-nine years later, “demise-parody penchant” remains a constant in my everyday thought-vocabulary.

Kenward wrote on a Great Stave. The Great Stave (U.K.-speak, in honor of Kenward’s heritage) stacks up the bass and treble staves, is a space for jotting down the full range of notes from the lowest rumblings to the highest crystalline harmonics. Anyone, any one of us, can range across a great emotional stave, feel and express the lowest thoughts and emotions, then, moments later, reverse ourselves and rise to the brightest expressions of happiness. Kenward, as lyricist and librettist, frequently and happily yoked himself to composers, and so had constant reminders of the fact (though he certainly already knew) that single notes, sequential melodies, the horizontal movement of events, however musical, cannot capture the full experience of living, its inextricably mixed range of feeling. For that a composer needs notes, but also needs chords, needs to stack up those notes of emotion and event, needs to keep them moving right along, sometimes in harmony, oftentimes clashing, to create an honest and satisfying complexity. As with music, so Kenward’s writing.

I was fortunate enough to know, visit, and on occasion publish Kenward. As a toast to a soul in transit I would only observe: As with his writing, so the man.

Maxine Chernoff

As a young poet, I had always adored the work of Kenward Elmslie. I don’t know how many times I read and reread *Circus Nerves* and *Girl Machine* among his many works.

So when Paul Hoover and I became board members of the Chicago Poetry Center, we were eager to invite him. He came to read in early 1981, and I was lucky enough to sit across from him at the dinner preceding the event.

Luckier still, I was sitting there when a drunk, homophobic poet on the board began to tease and harass him. My solution to this was to talk to Kenward and shut the homophobe out of

the conversation. He and I got along splendidly from the start. There was much laughter and gaiety between us—it was as if we’d always been friends.

We began a weekly mail correspondence that lasted about 25 years. Our letters were newsy, intimate, and hilarious as our first meeting (and are archived at UCSD). They led to an invitation to visit his beautiful summer home in Calais, VT.

We drove from Chicago with our 6 year-old daughter and marveled at the beauty of his gray house with the orange shutters, his pond, the cottage by the pond where we stayed and all the beautiful furniture and Joe Brainard paintings on the walls. And then there was Joe, who was initially shy with us but very warm to our daughter, who quickly developed a huge crush.

Days were spent at the pond, where Joe, in short black trunks and lots of oil, would work on his wonderful tan and the Padgetts and their dog would often join us.

One afternoon there was a snake in the garden, which terrified our daughter and increased Joe’s hero status in her eyes when he kindly moved it to another location.

Dinners were Kenward’s daily offering (he’d write until late afternoon)—the most memorable was a 4th of July banquet with whole giant lobsters and fresh peas from his garden floating in butter.

After dinner there was an hilarious game they called “Shit on your Neighbor,” where you would dump all your cards on the person next to you. As we played this, we drank Lots of Jägermeister—we were quite drunk and sick (me) by the end of the evening.

Solo visits with Kenward in NY followed, where I stayed in an austere and beautiful bedroom in his tall, skinny brownstone in Greenwich Village. The most memorable of those visits was one when I was reading with David Leavitt at the Poetry Project. Kenward was working on collaborations with artists and along with Joe, artist Ken Tisa was at dinner. Kenward made a delicious meal including the best soup I ever ate (cream of artichoke), and Joe brought me a gardenia.

There were more visits of Kenward to Chicago, one which had a cabaret feel—Kenward had begun performing his poem/songs—“Sneaky Pete,” “Tango Bang Bang,” the beautiful “Who’ll Prop me up in the Rain,” and “Air.” The large audience was ecstatic.

Once he flew us to Columbus, Ohio, for the world premiere of Chekhov’s “Three Sisters.”

For his 80th birthday I read a cento composed from our letters at St Marks. Kenward was in good spirits but needed a wheelchair, which Ned Rorem inquired about. “Why the wheelchair?” “Because I can’t walk well!”

Another wonderful surprise were the frequent vintage postcards sent randomly and always on my birthday a barrage signed with funny aliases including Richard Nixon and Tarzan (the postcard images were pertinent to the names.)

The last time I saw Kenward was in Vermont in 2013. His memory was impaired by then, but he knew me and the other visitors and told us fantastic stories involving a fox under his chair in winter and ladies from town who drowned working on his garden—I imagine he didn’t appreciate them taking over his job.

I will so miss this wonderful man and beautiful writer of operas, songs—one sung by Nat King Cole—and acrobatic, totally original and surprising poems. He could be a little testy, as we all are, but mostly he was a kind, wholly generous friend, whom I loved dearly. As our tribe says, he was a mensch and my best friend for 40 years.



Elmslie and Donna Dennis. Photo by Joe Brainard.

Donna Dennis

I believe I first met Kenward at a party I crashed at his house. Not the house on Greenwich Avenue but another in the Village he lived in before moving to Greenwich Avenue. I was new to New York and new to the St. Mark’s poetry scene. Ted Berrigan told Martha Diamond and me that there was a party at someone named Kenward’s house and that Kenward wanted more girls there. So we went.

Later, on Greenwich Avenue I was an invited guest with Ted for dinner with Kenward and Joe Brainard. It was spring and Kenward served salmon steaks, new potatoes and asparagus. It was from Kenward that I learned that the best way to eat asparagus was with one’s fingers. It was apparently acceptable table manners, too. I was astonished, but why not? If this warm, gracious, elegant man could do it, I could too.

In the early 1980s Kenward invited me to collaborate. A wonderful open-ended invitation. What form would our collaboration take? Not long after at a New Year’s Eve party at Michael Lally’s, I was telling Kenward about a recent Friday night when my boyfriend and I had walked from Midtown down 8th Avenue and, with the idea of celebrating the diversity of the city, had gone into every bar representing a different culture we came across. By the time we got to the Village we were quite inebriated. Kenward loved the story, and, thinking of our incipient collaboration declared, with glee, that’s it! We’ll do a pub crawl—a pub crawl from A to Z!

And so we began. Kenward had a lovely summer retreat in Vermont and I was invited there to work. I spent part of the next three summers in Calais with Kenward and Joe. Kenward and I together made a list of possible names of bars for each letter of the alphabet. These were to be imaginary bars in towns and cities across the country.

Kenward and I were both free to choose any letter of the alphabet to begin. Whoever among us got to a letter first would determine the response of the other. I made a drawing for El Zebra Club (for “E”) from a photo I’d taken of a nondescript bar I’d seen in Aberdeen, South Dakota. Kenward, in response, placed El Zebra at 242 Bushmilller Blvd. in Montclair, N.J. His bar for the letter E had a “Live Act in Mirror Maze Surroundings” and MADAME X and her “educated doggy act.” When Kenward wrote first for “N” it became Nouvelle Kiwis-‘N-Art Bar. He described a bar in a building shaped like a giant Cuisinart, and I was challenged to draw a Cuisinart-shaped building that looked like a believable, hip, L.A. destination.

What great fun we had. We came together every evening for dinner which was always at six PM when the light was most golden. If Kenward had completed a poem that day, he would read it to Joe and me as we enjoyed drinks in the Adirondack chairs. If I had completed a drawing, I placed it on the mantle by the dining table inside for Kenward and Joe to see when we came in to eat. Kenward described our process as “break[ing] down the



Elmslie and Ann Lauterbach. Photo courtesy of Lauterbach.

barrier between image and narrative, so that each drawing and tale coheres with back-and-forth intensity." Kenward had it right. *26 Bars* was a true collaboration.

I cherish strong memories of Kenward, and I will miss this beautiful and magnanimous man forever. Kenward had a beautiful voice and his lovely song, "Who'll Prop Me Up in the Rain" has been running through my days since I heard the sad news. It made me cry the first time I heard it and it does now. I count it as one of the most beautiful songs I know. I can still hear and see Kenward sing it, jukebox propped on his knees and I can hear his explosive laughter of delight, the expression of pleasure he took in his friends. How can I find the words to express how fortunate I was that Kenward numbered me among his friends?

John Godfrey

I was not in Kenward's social world but I met him in the late '60s when we were at gatherings. I would prep my nerve and try to be sharp in conversation with him. I meant to honor him by indicating my knowledge of and attention to his writing. He appreciated the attention of straight young poets. From the late '60s into the '70s he hosted Valentine's Day parties at his home on Greenwich Avenue and I was an invitee—I lived in the opposite city beyond Avenue B.

When he edited his own magazine—*Z*, *ZZ*, *ZZZ* etc.—in the '70s, I was shy of submitting work. In '83, however, he requested a manuscript for his *Z* Press. I had been writing prose poems for several years. I sent him 40, he chose 30 and when *Where the Weather Suits My Clothes* was published in '84 it was beautifully designed and formatted. I felt like the king of a mostly sunny country.

We poets of all ages wondered why Kenward

was not alongside the famous four as a foundational New York Poet. Kenward never accommodated conventions as the big four seemed to over time. His poems are unfettered, madcap and elegant. He grafted imagination to a rich vocabulary and they present as an iconoclastic unity—his mind. He was a brilliant stand-up entertainer of comic sophistication and sang with a full baritone voice. It's as if in his poems Kenward stands on the 10 meter platform and executes a perfect olympian dive: double gainer, inside jackknife, double back flip, swan finish.

After a surge of collections published in the '70s, his skills adapted to contexts of real feeling, of expressions of grief and loss. A generous prince of *poésie*.

Ann Lauterbach

KEYWORD : KENWARD

It's a sunny, still, Sunday, the Fourth of July. I have been pulling fistfuls of a ground-cover I wish I had never planted from around the roses, a tricky and not entirely successful endeavor. It has been some days since I received an email from Ron Padgett with the ominous heading "sad news." I knew immediately what it must be, since Kenward has been declining for some years, and had turned, in April, ninety-three. While I was endeavoring to dissuade the invasive plant, I could hear Kenward's voice singing *what I want to know is/ when the good times waaaane/ who'll prop me up in the rain?* He had a strong, warm voice, both in speaking and singing, with a resonance, like a cello's, at the lower end.

Spellcheck wants to change his name to *keyword*.

We met when I was still living in London, in the early 1970s. I cannot recall under what auspices this meeting occurred, but I think

he had written to me prior to his coming to England. And when I began my protracted return to New York (it took almost two years of coming and going and coming again), he invited me to stay for a while on the top floor of his house at 104 Greenwich Avenue in the West Village. I was waiting on tables at the Broome Street Bar, trying to figure out how to reconnect to poetry and art here, having been away for seven years.

It would be hard to overestimate the significance of Kenward's friendship over the next decades; he extended, allowed, encouraged, included; he gave me a sense of belonging which began to alter the image of itinerant stray I often felt myself to be. This familial feeling rose from his bearing; a solicitous, empathic kindness. He believed in reciprocity. We shared stories of our difficult families; we read to each other from letters, poems; he played his songs as they were being written. He liked conversation; he was mild in manner, gracious and curious about the details of life; he loved writing and receiving postcards; these he also collected with a zealot's passion. Cultural ephemera moved and amused him. He typed his messages, and signed his name in flowing blue ink.

He liked a certain wickedness of tongue and would give out a short hoot of delight disguised as shock. He did not suffer fools gladly and had a nose for falsity; he used the phrase "true blue" which meant, I think, persons who were without guile or subterfuge; not pretentious or cunning; an ethics of personal fidelity that one could trust. He did not disguise his inherited wealth, but neither was he ostentatious, and many over the years benefited from his often anonymous magnanimity. He gave wonderful parties, at which worlds of theatre and music and poetry and art and publishing mingled happily, as if we were all denizens from another era of social ease. (These gatherings on Greenwich Avenue felt entirely different from the gallery openings and dinners that often followed them, which invariably were about strategies of connection.) Kenward's life and work straddled all of these practices, but he wasn't a dilettante, dabbling; he was devoted and engaged and demanding of himself and of others; he was constitutionally discerning and critical. His relation to ambition was complex; the idea of a professional career was, I think, anathema, and he showed something like anxious disdain as he witnessed the academy's increasing infiltration into the lives of younger artists and poets. *What happened to the Poem as Poem?* he lamented.

He often wore a large medallion at events, and liked it when persons dressed up, although he

dressed deliberately casually, even sloppily. He could be moody, almost petulant, which I thought arose from some lingering childhood disappointment and sorrow. His poems are layered slides of linguistic brilliance shot through with humor and pathos. I think he wanted more than anything to be recognized for his work as a writer; a poet and lyricist. *The Glass Harp*; *Lizzie Borden*. We went to the opening at Glimmerglass; I think I drove for the first time with a passenger on big roads! Talk about trust. (City girl, I learned to drive very late.) He read widely and loved the idea of collaboration as evidence of community and care, as many of his *Z* Press publications attest. He had some lovely objects but was not acquisitive. He liked giving and receiving gifts; the ceremonies of birthdays and holidays. This pleasure he shared with Joe. I sometimes think Kenward's greatest gift to me was meeting and becoming friends with Joe Brainard. And I think Joe's death must have been the beginning of Kenward's protracted withdrawal from the world.

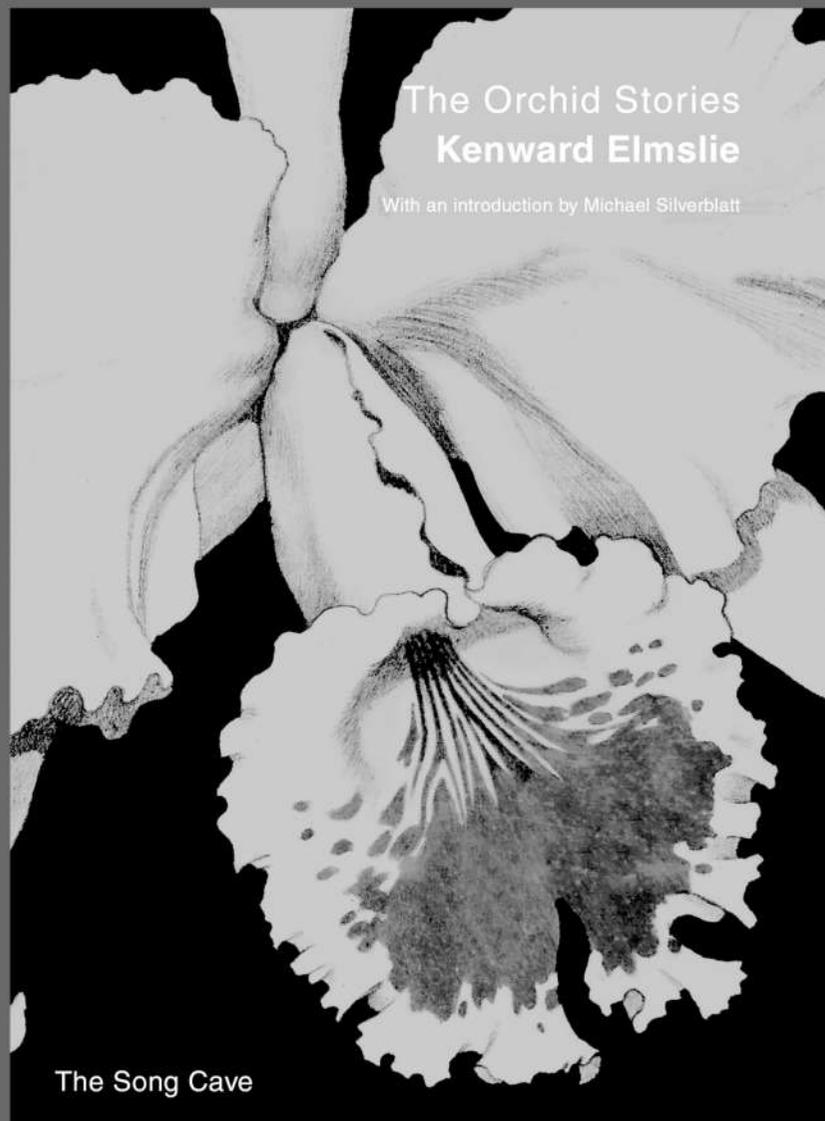
He had a collection of souvenir spoons which he kept in a large glass. He loved to cook and was very good at it, improvising and elaborating on, say, Marcella Hazan. He liked cheese and cream. Summers, I would visit him and Joe in Calais, Vermont, where Kenward had a simple house that sat above a pond, in which we (but not Kenward) would swim, often joined by Ron and Pat. Sometimes Bill and Beverly Corbett would drive over; or we would drive to them. Kenward had a vegetable garden; we ate salad and peas from it. He and I flew to California and gave some readings together; we went to Bolinas where I met Joanne Kyger and Bill Berkson for the first time. I hate to fly; it terrifies me. I remember, flying back, sitting next to Kenward, I felt safe.

Forty years ago we were sitting together maybe in Vermont, maybe drinking Campari, maybe about to play a game of backgammon. I was lamenting yet another failed romance. *Whatever happened to mindless bliss?* I sighed. Kenward gave out one of his hoots of pleasure. That fall, I turned forty, and Kenward gave me a poem composed of thirteen stanzas of quatrains, called "Mindless Bliss." It is framed on my study wall.

Steven Taylor

June 30 2022. This morning there were white lilies in the florist's window. Lilies always bring him in. One could not wish for a more thoughtful and loving friend.

Early '80s, I'd been helping poets to tune their lines, and he got in touch. He had a beautiful



Like the orchids that provide their leitmotif, these interwoven stories by Kenward Elmslie are exquisite, exotic, and oneiric, as if they had been written in another world. Although each of *The Orchid Stories* stands alone, their characters and moods recur frequently, in a swirl of visual echoes and the bewildering clarity of a dream. Even the characters themselves, with their shifting names and genders, have an illusive reality that enhances the pleasure of these tales.

The Song Cave is honored to present Kenward Elmslie's long out-of-print masterpiece, first published by Paris Review Editions in 1973. With an introduction that provides a fresh sense of Elmslie's oeuvre by Michael Silverblatt, host of KCRW's *Bookworm*, this spectacular and spectacularly overlooked book is at last available to a new generation of adventurous readers.

"Kenward Elmslie's *The Orchid Stories* is, to use Balzac's term, a *chef d'oeuvre inconnu*, and one of the funniest, most gorgeous American prose fictions of the latter 20th century. It's wonderful to have it in print again."
-John Ashbery

"Like Franz Kafka and Raymond Roussel, Kenward Elmslie has created throughout his oeuvre - but nowhere more strikingly than in *The Orchid Stories* - a human universe that both reflects our own and stands at a bizarre angle to it. -Harry Mathews

Available at www.the-song-cave.com

Pleyel piano and a thing for major seventh chords, played a couple of his songs, nice baritone, swings. There was a lyric on the stand. What's that? Have a go if you like.

We made an LP, a play, a cassette book, another play, a dance work, a musical, and started an opera about Oscar Wilde, hence the lilies. These are long projects; one lives with them always.

Scores were made by hand on paper then, with pencils and erasers and rulers. For the final draft and the players' parts, you used a fountain pen. If the hand is lovely, the players will play well. Lyrics and dialog are typed on the Selectric. Programs and flyers are cut with scissors, pasted with paste, and xeroxed. Fold and affix postage stamp. We played uptown, downtown, out of town, Boston, Providence, Detroit, Chicago, LA, SF, Boulder.

Working with a poet, you memorize their stuff. It's like having another mind. "Grashulations, finger print man" and "cool black jelly full of glints" have nudged me out of many a malaise. The territory is music hall, radio comedy, Flash Gordon, the funny papers, inter-war automatism, cowboy shorts, and jargon that he understood as confetti. We were from different planets but had these things in common, plus the tunes he'd loved in the 40s that my father sang in the 50s.

Summers in Vermont, the only obligation is to be at supper. Joe reads all day in the sun. Boxes of books come in the mail. Joe puts the perfect novel on your pillow before you arrive. Beneath the pillow is a quilt. At a town hall event, several ladies are selling their winter stitchery. Kenward buys all the quilts. It helps the ladies and makes the beds perfect.

He was phenomenally adaptable to showbiz circumstances. Black box, lecture hall, opera house, college gym, bat-cave recording studio, Fugs concert, you could take him anywhere. I see him at a table at the back of the house, the Bottom Line. It's heavy drums and amps but he's good-vibe attentive. Afterward he remarked on the head-bobbing.

As a collaborator he was a dream. Poets tend to be attached to their lines; music is to serve the lines or leave them alone. But Kenward came from opera, where poetry serves music, and from theater, these massively collaborative media. He liked complex forms, but if I asked him to simplify a stanza, or to repeat a particular metrical riff, or give me another quatrain like that one, or cut a lyric by a third, he did it, with great facility and nary a complaint. Wordsmith was his tag for the trade. I was the tunesmith. Now words fail. So long, Ol' Pard.

Anne Waldman

KENWARD ELMSLIE, NEVER A ONE NIGHT STAND

It was as exciting as performance being around Kenward, welcome in his aura. Often a special occasion, celebratory, bells and whistles. Occasional poems read aloud, on birthdays, hand-made valentines, a stunning new Joe Brainard collage, and deep gossip. Dress up. Nights in perpetual motion. Sometimes dancing. Kenward himself already a performer, celebrated lyricist, librettist. High talk, punning repartee. New York School screwball comedy over soap opera. An edginess of spontaneity. Lots of cultural reference to a wittier time. Much later I realized it was the wittier time, and we were the wittier time.

Exciting as performance too was his poem *Girl Machine*, which I published in a small edition (Angel Hair Books, 1971). With Steven Taylor, it *became* performance, and invoked the dazzling and dizzying choreographic magic of Busby Berkeley.

Kenward recalled: "When Gerard Malanga asked me to write a think-piece about Busby Berkeley's films for Andy Warhol's *Interview* ... I decided to take the easy way out and write a poem. I measured the width of the column the poem would need to fit into, and departed from my usual practice of seemingly scatter-

shot line breaks. I worked up a visual design for my poem: a series of exactly proportioned chunks, mostly square in shape, which would form an orderly, varied columnar sequence. The poem was accepted and ... I began to include it in poetry readings—the first time at MoMA. *Girl Machine* jumped out at listeners, provoking an immediate, energy-charged response my other poems failed to elicit. So mysterious! Grrrr! I had no idea why. It was a poem written to order ... I had nothing to do with it ... Understudy becomes Star. How savvy of Angel Hair to publish it solo. A star turn, ta-da, on the page, and, subsequently, as sung."

But Kenward was also serenely laid back, mysterious behind his maniacal propensity for what I like to call "ulatbamsi" or upside-down imagination/language. "Ulatbamsi" is a Sanskrit term used for tantric practices and descriptions of seeming surreal contradiction. I watched him calmly gardening with a watering can. Playing cards, snoozing over a stack of novels. A gentle body for one of his size, both elegant/awkward, always endearing. Sophisticated insouciance. I still hear his voice, eyes wide and theatrically rolling. Amusement! He was also up to date with catastrophes as well. Good civilian, empathetic. Caring for friends with AIDS. Staying abreast of the Vermont doings, a citizen of Poets Corner. He published my poem pamphlet *Cabin* written at his lake I had named Veronica.

Once on LSD we were mystified by an alien fungus in a trembling patch of landscape ateem with bug buzz, and dance of shadows. Chiaroscuro. The fleshly creature vibrated with a pale paddle foot as if reaching for light. I didn't want to touch it. "Paddlefoot?" (laughter). Or did Kenward know and was he just having me on? It was a bandaid I had discarded maybe a half hour before.

We were a duo during the Palm Casino Revue, on 3rd Ave, in 1974, with our tuxes and penguin costumes singing several of Kenward's greatest hits. Lines drift in sometimes from "One Night Stand" when I otherwise might be asleep:

....tends to use the verb: "enthuse",
one night stand keep it a one night stand....

....when I first spied him I loved every freckle,
now I can't abide him bring back Dr. Jekyll.

We were over the moon in the company of Candy Darling and Jackie Curtis, and some of Charles Ludlam's stellar company. Kenward was always a pro, prompt, waiting our turn in the wings. We had carefully put on our make-up together. I remember dark blue eyeshadow.



Elmslie and Anne Waldman. Photo courtesy of Naropa Archives.

Trevor Winkfield

There's a world of difference between art and the art world, just as there's now a vast difference between art collectors and art lovers. Kenward belonged with the latter. He loved art for itself, not as investment, nor as an expensive means of dazzling his friends.

Indeed, his friends were often responsible for the art on his walls. His longtime companion Joe Brainard, of course, but also Alex Katz, Red Grooms, Duncan Hannah, Francis Picabia, Donna Dennis and myself.

When I spent my first night at Kenward's in 1969, in lieu of a Gideon Bible I found a Joseph Cornell box and a cutout Larry Rivers penis as my nightstand companions. A signed, unmustachioed Mona Lisa by Marcel Duchamp nestled in the adjacent bookcase, while downstairs in the living room was a portrait of Kenward's actress friend Ruth Yorck by Oskar Kokoschka, unfashionable both then and now. In the same room, sitting unobtrusively in the alcove where the fireplace had been, lay one of Andy Warhol's wooden Heinz tomato ketchup boxes, a utilitarian-looking sculpture which was once thrown out by Kenward's maid, who naturally assumed it was garbage (Kenward returned from a few days out of town just in time to retrieve it from the curbside).

Kenward's prose and poetry is packed with images, so it's no surprise that he picked a play by the painter Henri Rousseau to refashion into one of his own, *City Junket*. And like John Ashbery, Kenward was a devotee of vintage

postcards, often utilizing them in his collages (ditto Ashbery). One of Kenward's few art reviews displays his sharp eye at its most succinct: describing an exhibition by the Surrealist Roberto Matta, he summed up his impressions thus: "(Six) huge paintings are arresting, messy and violent cartoons of juggernauts that menace and engorge saggy and helpless human outlines. Floating in space, their jagged disparities (here an entrail, there a stairway) encroach. Such malevolent combines!" An artist's eye indeed.

INTERVIEW

Amanda Monti w/ Lillian Paige Walton

"I wanted to become a mushroom. I put an ad on Craigslist." So opens Amanda Monti's *Mycelial Person* (Vegetarian Alcoholic Press), a swirling meditation on exchange, desire, and identity. Like an actively fermenting substance, the poet's debut collection transforms before the eye, moving between prose, verse, and photo. Written in Italian, German, and English (Monti speaks all three), the book is peppered with overheard language, in-person, and online encounters. In these moments of virtual and corporeal overlap, Monti's expert story-telling and wit shine through. "Someone at WWF stops me and tells me about the Koalas," Monti writes, "I say thank you for being out on the street. He says that 'our planet is dying.' I know, I say, I know. He asks me where my accent is from and, 'do I like it here?' If he means the planet, yes, there is beauty here." Curious, observant, and warm, *Mycelial Person* speaks its wisdom to the reader long after its last breath. — Lillian Paige Walton

LILLIAN PAIGE WALTON: I remember talking with you about a passage from Shiv Kotecha's *The Switch* and how we love poetry that is full of information—historical, scientific, or otherwise. *Mycelial Person* feels very much in that tradition. It's not a single story or collection of poems, but a network of information or parts that touch.

AMANDA MONTI: I'm so glad you picked up on the word "network." The idea of weaving a network felt very important to the kind of attention I wanted to cultivate within the book. I love Shiv's book so much because it shape-shifts, form-switches, which feels closer to my experience of reading and writing... I took cues from that for my book. Formally, I move between three different modalities. There's story, body, and lyric. But I was using all of these forms to experiment with attention... paying attention to the lines between inside/outside, the shared and the distinct bodies that make up organic life, participating while also paying attention... but this network is by no means all encompassing. In fact, it's pretty much the opposite. It's full of holes and

incoherence. I am interested in holes, though, because those are the moments in which we can better see how a fabric is made and how it can be... undone? Patched up? I was using all three modalities to sit with those holes, to make sense of incoherence, or to just allow it to be.

LPW: I'm curious to hear about the timeline and your process for writing the book. Can you locate the writing to specific places?

AM: As for writing process: much of the writing happened in transit (until the pandemic hit) and very much in response to learning that I was doing at the time. I always write in order to digest knowledges. And so I wrote *Spore Radical*, while crafting a mushroom with all of these different strangers from craigslist, while also trying to teach myself about mycelium and the world of fungi. The narrative was unfolding while I was writing.

The second part of the book, "Florae filling W/holes," grew out of a ritual I did for, well, more than two months, but I only docu-

mented a week of it. In this ritual I spent an hour each day drawing around weeds with colorful street chalk, placing my body into the street, and taking notes on site. I was interacting with people, eavesdropping on conversations, allowing myself to wander into association and dreamworld. The final part of the book is a collection of poems, probably the most composed because I wrote it at home, after the pandemic hit.

LPW: Your hands and palm reading appear to be recurrent themes in your work. Your hands are the central subjects of your gorgeously written and highly-seductive letter that appeared in *McSweeney's* Issue 62. In *Mycelial Person*, one of the things you offer in the craigslist ad for the mushroom hat is a palm reading in exchange. Can you tell me more about this interest?

AM: I'm so happy you asked me about that! Palm reading has been a big part of my growing up and the first instance through which I encountered storytelling. I learned palm reading when I was a teenager from one

of my mum's many divination friends one summer in Rome, an exuberant tall lady, who was highly sensitive and theatrical and kind-hearted. After that I looked into so many peoples' palms, spinning stories from the cues that were given to me by the wrinkles in their skin, touching their hands and translating it into words. I think that this was a very important exercise in storytelling and I also paid witness to the profound healing effect that stories and meaning-making can have on people. To make sense of time through stories satisfies such an innate human desire and palm reading does that in very literal ways. It's been a beautiful way for me to connect with people, strangers, friends, lovers because it's so intimate but also playful, which is the kind of writing I want to produce. Palm reading as a poetic practice reminds me that I am writing stories with/through/because of bodies.

Funnily enough, I have also been obsessed with hands and fingers from a very young age—how did it take me so long to understand that I was a dyke????—I drew hands on all of my notebooks, coffee cups, tables. I think it was me coming out to myself over and over again, until I finally did to other people, too. Gay surfaces that can produce so much pleasure, that are a direct extension from the heart... what a beautiful site to write into/out of...

LPW: You write: "I had a heightened sensitivity for the effect of stories on hands"

and faces.” This is such a beautiful passage which immediately calls to mind the pleasure of performance, sharing poetry, and perhaps even activism. Can you speak a bit about the relationship between these practices for you?

AM: Magic and poetry share so much. A good poetry reading is the same as binding spells. Whether it’s someone reading your palm or a line of poetry, both pull your inside out into the open, put the word into the collective, make it real. It’s transformative. There is something alchemical in this movement from in to out—stories do that, too. They pull the inside to the outside and back again, albeit slightly changed, like a membrane. Magic and poetry also create temporary community... I am thinking about storytelling with Donna Haraway: a story as an ability to respond, stories as a practice of response-ability. I think that when people gather for poetry there is the potential for a “we” and that’s always transformative. It’s also FUN. Let’s not forget that poems can be fun and that transformation can be pleasurable. I like to enjoy my stories and my magic with a pinch of light and tenderness. Before I was a poet I was a theatre/performance maker and the potential for embodiment and the magic of “we” is still hugely important for my writing.

LPW: You’ve mentioned Shiv Kotecha’s book and Donna Haraway. Who are other poets and writers that resonate with you? Do you have any favorite books, poetry or otherwise, as of late?

AM: I’m thinking of Samuel Ace’s *Meet Me There: Normal Sex & Home in Three Days* as a collection I will return to for the rest of my days. I am thinking of so much writing in *We Want It All: An Anthology of Radical Trans Poetics* (edited by Andrea Abi-Karam and Kay Gabriel) that makes me grateful to be a poet today... I’ve also come to think that living adjacently to a book constitutes for a kind of reading. Here are some books I haven’t read yet, but already love: I dipped into *Anatomy of The Spirit* by Caroline Myss as I was waiting for its owner, a beautiful dancer, a poem themselves, to pick up laundry... *The Translator of Desires* by Muhyiddin Ibn ‘Arabi has been on my bedside table for months... Someone recently read me a line from Rosie Stockton’s *Permanent Volta* and it pulled my heart out.

LPW: As much as writing can be a solitary endeavor, the actual process of publishing a book often involves so many people. You credit many individuals with helping with this process, including poets Mirene Arsanios and LA Warman. How would you describe your experience of working with them? What do you feel they brought to the book?

AM: Publishing is a truly ecological process—this book is part of a whole ecosystem of strangers, acquaintances, friends, and mentors, whom I am all deeply grateful for. Both

Mirene and LA are writers I’ve admired for a long time and have had the chance to study with. When I decided to commit to poetry I began actively seeking out writers I was obsessed with and would see if they did any teaching. Lucky for me, LA had just started teaching online classes of poetry. I took a class on *Writing The Erotic Body*—it maybe was the first online class I had ever taken and it was so wonderful. We read queer erotica together and touched and peeled eggs and responded in poetry. LA is a very generous teacher and her pedagogy and poetic work has expanded my ideas of what could be possible. We’ve stayed in touch ever since. She read some drafts of my manuscripts that later became *Mycelial Person*. Similar with Mirene. I was in awe of everything that Mirene produced and followed her work around for a couple of years until she eventually became one of my teachers at my grad program. She’s a fellow multilingual writer operating in an anglophone context and has really challenged me to think about the choice of writing in a language that is learned and non-intuitive.

LPW: I also published a book on an independent press during the pandemic and found the process to be extremely intimate. I became very close with my publishers during that time. I’m curious to hear about what it was like to work with Vegetarian Alcoholic Press during this time and if any of this rings similar to your experience.

AM: My publisher was so kind and gentle. The shift in tonality at the onset of the pandemic was immediate. All gestures of formality became grotesque. It gave way to an immediate kind of closeness, for sure. We learned to be so much more patient with each other. The idea of “projected timelines” was quite frankly hilarious, making the publishing process less jarring for me personally. We would just write each other emails, checking in on how we were doing. I’ve made so many internet friends these past two years, my publisher is one of them.

LPW: Now that *Mycelial Person* is complete, what other projects are on your horizon?

AM: This summer I had the utmost delight of being commissioned to work on a soundpoetry piece with the wonderful composer Alice Tolan-Mee. I adore working with radio and recorded speech, especially collaboratively. So at the moment I am working on a radio play *Love it did Love* and some smutty poems set in the Polish Delis of my area. Hopefully, they can turn into sounds some day.

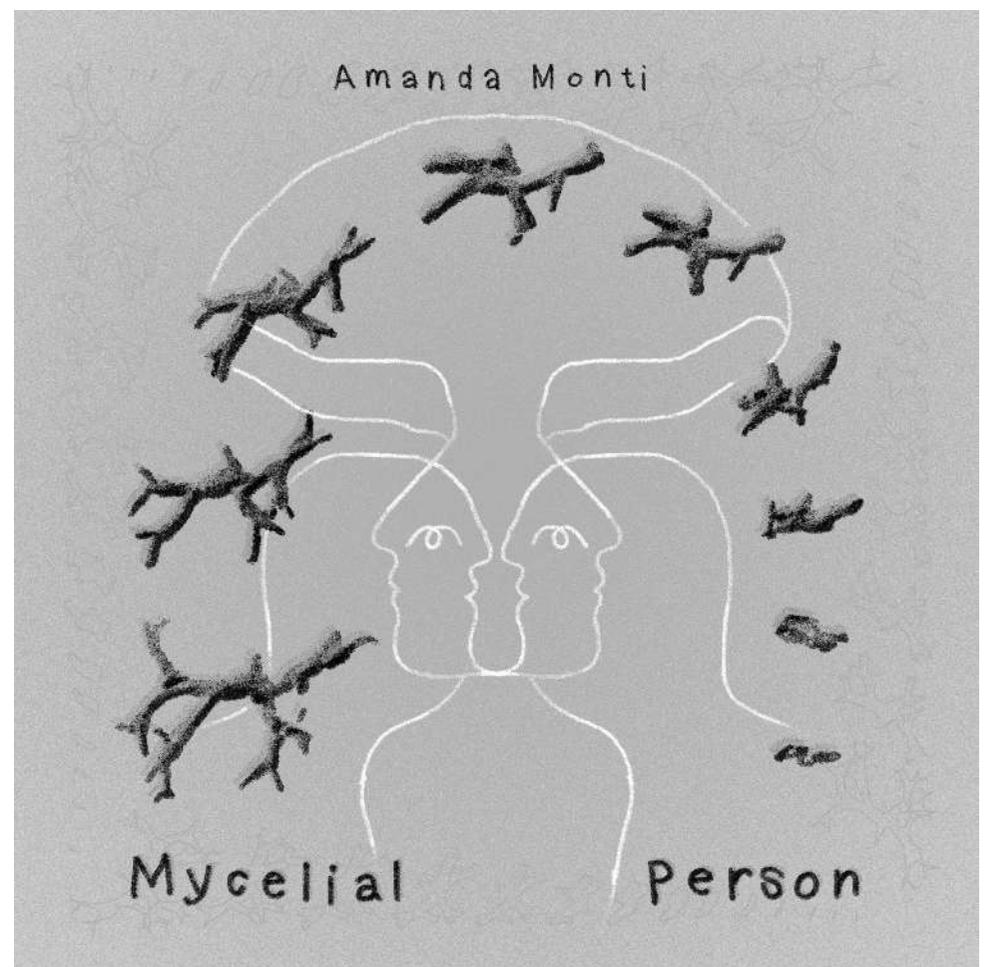
LPW: You write: “I colour the curb and hear someone / they are gone before I can explain that I am writing a love letter.” Would you say *Mycelial Person* is a love letter of sorts?

AM: It’s a love letter without a recipient. The whole book is haunted by a Chris Isaac song, “Wicked Game,” in which he sings ever so softly “Nobody loves no one...” *Mycelial*

Person finds solace and tenderness in this. While there is no distinct recipient to this quest, it’s a love confession for missed connections, unrequited desire, unlikely kinships, holes, the sticky stuff that makes up “togetherness.” Whether that be soil or craigslist, romantic or platonic, weeds or concrete. While writing I secretly wondered whether learning about fungi might also teach me something about love. And so far I am finding that mycelium instructs me on the many forms that relationality can take and honestly, I am still finding out what this can mean for human kinships. Nobody loves no one...

LPW: How does one become a mycelial person? Asking for a friend.

AM: Oh, but you already are!



Mycelial Person is out now from Vegetarian Alcoholic Press.

Simone White

Washington Crossing the Delaware/ Number 28/June 6, 2022

There was to be an art historical joke about Washington's balls in this space, for I am a lover of tawdry jokes and poop humor. There is in fact a bejeweled or engorged set of cherries peeking out from beneath the war costume of the General crossing the Delaware resting so as to catch the eye, to humiliate, and also to allow for plausible deniability. BUTT Isaac cried out when I explained the grammar of certain common curses and we busted a gut laughing almost til we cried because how could it be that ass means butt and shit is actually poop and this is *exclamatory*. Butt! and fuck! are not the same. It's a wild painting. I am a patriot as everyone knows, the sublimity of the country still lives with me; I do not struggle with my Americanness. Whatever I am is one with the General and the double prick Leutze gave the man in the picture— better to fuck you with, my dear, if you must know how I speak to myself. Pretending this is a world in which there could be a symbolic, I find the rosy fob foreboding and terrible, fucked coming and going over the River. Crazy, it's not even this painting that interests me, but the relay between it and the Ab Ex conversation TJ Clark is having with all of Western thought (how do you start a conversation like that you might ask and the punchline is, by quoting Hegel, but only after Frank O'Hara). I'm twitchy around Ab Ex, it excites me in a bad way, I feel ill will toward Number 28, but I'm ignorant and can't really follow the guy's moves. Clark's I can follow though, you feel me. I declare *je suis l'une d'elles. Je déclare avoir avorté* and also I can't stand the domineering tone of this form of art criticism. I thought I was going to jail yesterday at the Park Slope Food Coop because that's the kind of bourgeois I am, the kind who gets arrested at the "supermarket" for being uncivil to white people. I am uncivil, Jace tells me so all the time. Trouble died today. The dead are piling up around us the gallows lift on the river of gore.

PORTFOLIO

I am climbing the stairs that I create...

Poems from PEN America's Prison and Justice Writing Program

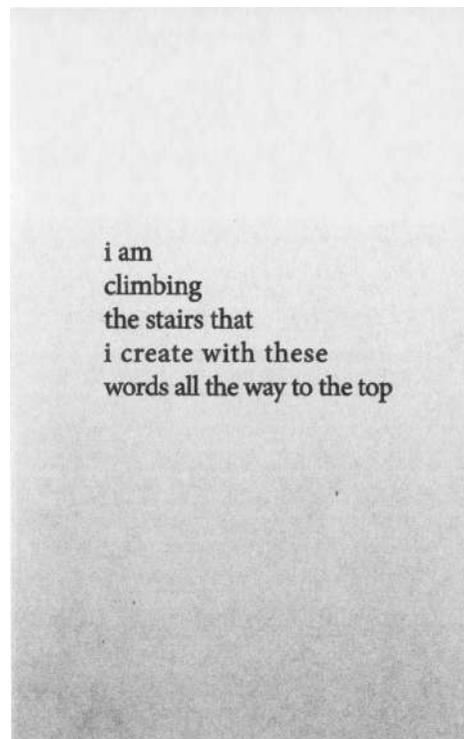
When we write to a prompt—whether it's answering a given question or writing under the constraints of a proposed structure—an alchemy takes place. A prompt bears an invocation to discover the position, flavor, and desire of our response. In this moment, we create an introspective archive of time and place.

When the same prompts are offered to a network of writers, a space is noticed between the mystical, personal summoning of an answer and the collective experience. For National Poetry Writing Month (NaPoWriMo), writers attempt to write one poem a day in April. In an effort to move through this challenge in fellowship with other writers, the Prison and Justice Writing Program (PJW) at PEN America distributed thirty shared prompts sourced from PJW mentors, staff, and volunteers to incarcerated poets involved in past and present program initiatives. The result of this dedicated exercise makes up the zine *I am climbing the stairs that I create with these words all the way to the top*, which houses the work of eighteen poets. You can access the zine digitally on the Prison and Justice Writing Blog.

Featured here are three poems in the collection—written by George Wilkerson, Desi Agadar, and Brian Stevens. As Stevens writes, “Every conversation begins with a single word.” This concerted zine is meant to be engaged in its entirety, a conversation beginning with each single page—including poems, visual responses, some of the original prompts, and space to sketch in your own temporal poetry.

I am climbing the stairs honors the ritual of writing, and celebrates the relationality of building a writing structure, especially under the weight of the Prison Industrial Complex's ongoing, and strengthening efforts to block intimate communication and collaboration. In reading the work, I hold both what it takes to return to the page day after day—in the midst of carceral spaces that function through the manipulation of time and resources—and the way in which the pleasure/drive/spark that may come from a practice is also a reminder of its necessity. As contributing poet Bryan Harris noted, “I enjoyed participating in the NaPoWriMo challenge. Now I have a collection of thirty poems written during April, and I have been given a jumpstart to make writing something new a daily practice.” Whether poetic communication is with the self, another person, or a world, there is a relationship words bend towards. It reminds me of the gift economy of language: a network that, as writers, we meet each other through.

— Anjali Emsellem, Program Assistant for Prison and Justice Writing at PEN America, and coordinator of the *I am climbing the stairs* zine project



Cover from *I am climbing the stairs that I create with these words all the way to the top*, designed by Robbie Pollock.

Dry Heave

Desi Agader

Here I am, not being there,
never was I there
nor here for that matter.
Can I not be here nor
there at the same time?
Isn't nowhere a place wanting
or not wanting to be?
By me not knowing
of this place
regardless of its actual
existence solidifies
it as being a place.
A place that I am
neither present nor
absent from, a
place I have grown
accustomed to
for a while

The Censorship

Brian Stevens

My letter got denied today. It boarded the censorship and sailed away. "Send home or destroy is what they said, some things are better off left unread. Don't want dangerous thoughts getting in my head, so here's a safer idea instead. Shut your mouth and do as you're told, over and over until you grow old. If you be a good dog and obey what we say, you just might make it out alive someday. If you bark, yell, and try to rebel, you'll just end up further in Hell. Propaganda is what we'll feed you, because conform is what you need to. Don't worry about the news out there, following the rules should be your only care. Your humanity will be saved, when your debts to society have been paid. But I'm not buying what they're selling, because radical change is the only money in the pocket of a felon. Time to rise against the powers that be, not gonna buy anymore of your commissary. Not gonna work in the kitchen for free, don't care how many chicken patties you give me. Not gonna cut the grass, take out the trash, or mop the floor. Not gonna do that anymore. Not gonna wear this uniform that makes us all look the same. I'm more than a number, I was born with a name. Not gonna wear this mask that covers up my mouth, because it's time to scream and it's time to shout! Let it be known, uncensored around the globe, we will no longer unrightfully do what we're told. We all have a voice, so let it be heard, every conversation starts with a single word. We gotta break down these walls and come together as one, because too much time is being spent in prison. I never got my letter, but I already knew what it would say, "You are not a slave and you will be free one day."

Active Rest

George Wilkerson

i am surprised only four of us made it out.
maybe we are the survivors; the rest
are casualties of inactivity induced by The Pandemic:
staff shortages had languished us on our pod since Christmas,

a month of gloomy gray air
since the dayroom lights stay off. most guys watch
our two TVs flicker narcotically — nonstop
weather, game shows, reruns, soap operas. not me.

though all it takes is an extra pair of hands
on duty to remove the giant slumber-boulder
blocking death row's rec yard door, only four of us
clamber out, like miners. our yard is drenched

in shadow, except for a strip of warmth glowing
on the basketball court. i stumble toward it, squinting
in the light, start walking figure-eights in that tight
space. more like a straight line. sun on face, pivot,

sun on back (facing the others), pivot, sun on face...
fifteen seconds each way, dodging goose shit with every step
on uneven concrete cracked by tufts of crabgrass
and orange anthills sprouting up like dusty magma.

we have thirty minutes and are prohibited to touch
each other or the snow that lies inside the wall's shadow.
a semitruck rumbles past beyond the perimeter wall
and a chilly breeze slants down out of bright blue sky.

i notice Lyle, a *northerner*, grinning like a kid and chomping
on a huge egg. i wonder where the fuck he got it — did he raid
a goose nest? — until i realize it is snow. energized, he climbs
onto the exercise apparatus, cranking out endless reps

of pull-ups, push-ups, sit-ups. i pivot, take sun on face,
hear little birds zip by, tweeting happily. i pivot,
see Vinnie jumping rope like a maniac for a few seconds
until it tangles in his ankles. his boxer's body is flabby, clumsy.

i note Jerzy in the guard's chair, imperious, silent
for the first time in weeks — smug and defiant, as if daring
the guard to tell him to get up. the guard turns his back
and i, too, pivot into the sun, walking side-by-side

toward the wall. the guard hollers up to the guntower
guard about the upcoming Super Bowl, while i start
writing this poem in my head, trying
to get as much mileage out of recreation as i can

as i stomp up a sweat. it might be another month
before i touch sun again — maybe less, maybe more —
so i breathe and blink in the light, i listen
to the sky, the road beyond the wall. toward the end

of our time, i let my body go
wide on the loops, less pivot more *swoop*, expanding
my laps, loosening my lines. suddenly i see
Vinnie break toward the snow

with only seconds left of recreation, so i too veer
onto damp and muddy grass
before the guard can stop us. we scoop up contraband,
the first snowballs we've made in decades

of incarceration, and launch them like spirits in a high arc
toward the prison's brick exterior
as our bodies swagger and skip
indoors.

Grails on Fire // In the Heat of the Knight

James Barickman

On-screen, plumes rise high over a lake of fire, the center of which burns at thousands of degrees celsius. Two figures stand in view of the flaming mountain. Soon the smoke will reach them both, enveloping the pair in toxic gas. Their bodies will quickly reduce to ash like the area around them, becoming part of the landscape, the air above. They will leave nothing behind except some brief, darkly portentous footage & two sets of footprints, etched in the dead earth, standing side by side.

At a film festival, Cori & I catch a screening of *Fire of Love*, a new documentary about the married French volcanologists & filmmakers, Katia & Maurice Krafft. For over twenty years, the Kraffts travelled the world chasing volcanic eruptions, documenting the phenomena at remarkable—often perilously close—distances. The couple had visited over 300 active volcanoes until, while observing an eruption at Japan’s Mount Unzen in 1991, the Kraffts were caught in a cloud of volcanic ash, killing them instantly.

Despite the nature of the Kraffts’ deaths, *Fire of Love* is no tragedy. Instead, the film presents Katia & Maurice Kraffts’ life & work as the ultimate love story—a portrait of people devoting their lives to one another through a shared passion & following it to the ends of the earth. Particular attention is paid to the Kraffts’ awareness of risk, of the extremity of their lifestyle, of the likelihood that it would kill them both, eventually. With this understanding, the Kraffts—&, in turn, the film—are able to ascribe agency to their demise; Katia & Maurice having gone out together, living the lives they wanted, doing what they loved.

After the screening there’s a Q&A with the film’s director, Sara Dosa. What was it like working with primarily archival material? How closely related were the editing & writing processes? How did you decide upon narration as a vehicle for storytelling? *Honk shoo...*

Soon I come alight with a question of my own. I turn to Cori & whisper a request of assurance. When she affirms, I raise my hand & an usher approaches me with a wireless microphone. I ask what seems to me the most obvious question concerning the movie we all just watched: what has working on this film taught you about love?

There’s a laugh, a rustle of bemused film bros permeating the theater. But Dosa regards my question with sincerity. While maintaining constant—dare I say, burning—eye contact, the director explains that the film has taught her how to live & die with meaning. That through finding this sort of meaning, the Kraffts were able to head off into the distant unknown resolutely & with no regrets. In a sense, Dosa seems to suggest, to love you have to accept the inevitability of tragedy.

On November 15, 2020, Lewis Warsh passes away. Nearly two years later, following prolonged pandemic-related scheduling complications, I help run sound for his memorial at the Poetry Project. Over forty people read & perform in celebration of Lewis’s memory. The event is extremely lovely & lasts more than three hours. Toward the end of the ceremony, I hear Anne Waldman read a poem about love, about having outlived a lover.

“Let Go!”—Waldman’s tribute to Warsh, her first husband—is framed by a disagreement: when did the couple cofound their long-running magazine & small press, *Angel Hair*? Lewis thinks it happened in the car, driving who knows where, but Anne remembers it differently. She’s certain the pair started the magazine at the Berkeley Poetry Conference in 1965, the night they heard Robert Duncan read. The night they met, the night they fell in love.

Waldman connects the restless urgency of budding love to the generative, radical atmosphere of the Berkeley scene; “what I liked was being in this crowd of future, of poetry / Want to make together another reality now.” To her, the conference represents a pivotal moment of shared discovery. It *had* to be that night. To suggest that falling in love was anything less than world-making, anything other than the act of imagining & then building a better tomorrow, would defy good praxis & upset the cosmic order. “Poetry,” Waldman explains, “is so... mysterious!”

I particularly recognize the excitement Waldman describes. High off discovery, the promise of further discovery. I fall in love: I grow exuberant, I overthink things, I project tender instances into far flung futures ahead. I go on long, ambling walks, arms loose at my sides, hips swaying lightly like the effervescent protagonists of French New Wave. Suddenly I’m Zazie. I’m Jean Seberg. I’m Catherine Deneuve, who sings while spinning under yellow umbrellas. With friends, I mine excuses to talk about whoever I’ve fallen for. I make leading remarks like “I’m doing good—actually, I’m doing *really* good.” I reveal too much. I grow anxious. I preemptively provide confidants with the words of comfort I’ll need once things ultimately crumble. At home, I lose all sense of idleness, all impulse to scroll or dull the hours, all taste for the internet. I read more. I start exercising. Start writing sonnets. Writing long, winding paragraphs about love & excitement & managing expectations. I know what you’re thinking. I know it’s too early to tell but. I know it sounds insane but. I know I shouldn’t get my hopes up but. But what if it’s more?

While Dosa’s film likens love to a kind of higher purpose, Waldman’s poem contextualizes it within a larger, karmic understanding. The poet posits love as a series of actions & inactions that follow us throughout our lives. This notion is alluded to with a set of two timelines concerning an Allen Ginsberg reading at Berkeley: in one, we cross the bridge to hear Ginsberg read & thus have a seminal experience; in the other, we don’t cross the bridge, we miss Ginsberg, & we regret it for the rest of our days. What Waldman implies here is that the disappointment of the latter scenario is directly related to the impact of the former; both stem from a deep belief that the reading holds inherent personal meaning & that attending has the capacity to change us.

With this invocation, made while remembering a former lover, Waldman is able to reframe romantic regret as a positive, as something self-revelatory. Our actions & missed opportunities become two sides of the same deliberative coin, both of which are equally consistent with & reaffirming of our values. Through both, we better shape our future imaginary. We discover who we are, we learn “what we could do & did, what we didn’t couldn’t do / & how far we could go.”

If we view the Kraffts through this lens, we don’t see lives free

from regret so much as ones informed by it. Every volcano visited or every eruption not captured on film. Every meal cooked atop scalding extrusive rock or quietly prepared in the French countryside. Family holidays fondly attended or quickly abandoned in favor of seismic activity. Babies born against backdrops of volcanic smog or not at all. Their lives, lived & un-lived, overlap into a series of indexes, illuminating at its center Katia & Maurice Krafft, total & intentioned. Almost like fate.

I fall in love. I get a charley horse during sex. Old man. She remarks on the tightness of my calves. Shows me how to stretch. On your back, raise your leg, upright. Keep perfectly straight, then rotate at the hip. Now pull.

Anne Waldman falls in love. Listens to Lewis spill all the gossip—about Berkeley, about the Beats, about the conference, about Jack Spicer, who hated the Beats, who “wouldn’t be part of the conference & then he died.”

At the time of writing, my favorite Jack Spicer book is *The Holy Grail*. Spicer describes the titular cup—the mighty medieval MacGuffin, the famed metonymic object of heroic glory—as the “opposite of poetry / Fills us up instead of using us as a cup the dead drink from.” I don’t think it’s a stretch to say that the grail, of course, is love.

I fall in love. We grab drinks after work. Get drunk gossiping. Who’s fucking who? Who can’t we stand? Lazy knees knock underneath barroom counters. We talk about books. About the quickness with which we seemed to forget the things we read, no matter how much we adore them. We talk about always feelings like frauds.

In “The Book of Percival”—The Holy Grail’s second poetic sequence—Spicer opens with a pursuit. Percival, knight of King Arthur’s court, is stalked through the forest by a so-called Fool-killer. Though Percival is never struck down, he ventures in shadow of threat while the mark of “fool” dogs him throughout the tale’s seven poems.

I fall in love. The conversation naturally turns to art theft. Which museums to heist, what work to steal. I’d take a Turner, hang it in a dark, windowless room. Watch it glow. If she could, she’d snag an af Klint—there had just been a major exhibition of the artist’s work at a prominent New York museum named after a mining baron. Encouragingly, I note how easy it’d be to slip a smaller piece into a bag & just stroll right out. No, she clarifies, she’d have to have one af Klint’s large canvases, the sort that tower over visitors at the base of the museum.

It’s worth noting that in Arthurian literature, Percival is the first knight to quest for the grail. The original 12th-century verse, *Perceval, the Story of the Grail*, written by the French poet Chrétien de Troyes, has the eponymous knight find his prize entirely by accident. He arrives at the grail castle through happenstance, briefly glimpses the sacred cup in a ritual procession, & then just leaves. That’s it. Only later does Perceval learn that the grail could have been his had he simply asked for it—but who asks about a cup? The knight is rebuked: “Those who see their chance / But never grasp it, hoping / For a better, must suffer for their failure” (de Troyes, lines 4663-5). Perceval didn’t know he had it so good. Don’t it always seem to go?

I'm cohosting a reading at my friends' bookshop just down the street from my apartment. I give her a flier I made—in collage a man clutches his forehead in agony, adjacent figures struggle in actioned sequence, a Martian beats a war drum, THRUB THRUB, & some poets are named. With light apology, she admits she has tickets for a show that night, but promises to swing by beforehand.

While the Perceval of yore's foolishness results in a failure to aid his king, Spicer's Percival can be read as a failure of love. In Spicer's telling, the hero's befuddlement extends to his entire quest. Perceval doesn't know what he's doing, admits: "I am, sir, a knight. Puzzled / By the way things go toward me & in back of me." All he can say for sure is that the path ahead is treacherous. "O, damn these things that try to maim me." He knows the risks of his journey, but not the rewards.

I'm worried she'll be late but she insists she can stay for just one drink. We sit on a wrinkled couch in the corner & I watch the bar disappear. Every ten minutes or so I remind her about the concert. It's ok, really, I won't be upset if you have to leave. It hasn't started yet, she explains. They probably won't begin on time. I can miss the sound check. I can miss the opener. The first couple songs.

Perceval's actions are motivated by the anticipation of pain. By steeling himself within "impossible armor," the knight believes he will emerge from the forest unscathed. That he can withstand pain purely by predicting it. In seeking to soften the blow, Perceval's expectation becomes a kind of fearful resistance.

Eventually she excuses herself to use the restroom. The bar returns. A friend edges over to me & asks with a slight, teasing lilt if "something's happening?" I shrug, smile just a little, then say nothing at all.

But the joke's on him. In Perceval's resolve to play the fool, rather than allowing himself to simply *be* a fool—to brace for disappointment over being disappointed—he becomes more stooge than man. Unlike the Kraffts or Waldman, who are able to derive a sense of meaning from love's pain, Percival becomes just a knight, "Fooled / Alive in its / Self." Stuck in a sorry state that Spicer emphasizes by comparing his hero to Oz's Tin Man—a walking suit of armor without possession of a heart.

When she sits back down she declares she's too tired to go to the show after all. The tickets were free, she admits, she might as well stay for another drink. Are you sure?

It's only in the final poem of the series that the knight at last finds the grail & spies something like redemption. Staring at the dish suspended in midair, Perceval notes "the pain of [his] existence soothed"—here was a cup! Here was a goal worthy of heroic labors, a victory amounting glory, a death not met in vain. "A grail, a real grail." All Perceval has to do is reach for it, expose himself to the killer lurking between branches. Become like the cup, floating with "No visible means of support...like june-berries in October or something [he] had felt & forgotten"—but it's already too late: de Troyes, or the poet's patron, dies. The verse is left unfinished & Perceval recedes from the narrative. Spicer echoes this history by leaving the knight in ambiguity, birds flying overhead, singing one word alone: fool.

Don't it always seem to go: I just need a break. I don't want to see you for a while. I'm getting back together with my ex. He came back "in a big way." I have a boyfriend. He doesn't know. There's a global pandemic. My flight's been cancelled. The borders are closing. You will never see me again. You will never see me again.

On-screen, a woman runs at a breakneck pace toward the camera, followed closely by a speeding van. Smoke climbs in the distance, growing nearer & nearer; she is running for her life. As the woman races by, we watch her mouth something & signal frantically into the lens before exiting out of frame. It doesn't take us long to realize no one has stayed behind the camera.

To fall in love means embarking upon the certainty of pain. To resist pain, to resist disappointment, frustration, heartache, means resisting the totality of sensation love promises. Means denying the wisdom its pain informs & the lives to which it leads.

This is because all of love's outcomes are inevitably difficult. Because love raises the stakes. Because love is the confluence of seismic pressure & tectonic movement that urges great fire from the depths of hell, out through our porous planet's surface & into the sky at calamitous velocity—becoming an awesome, temporal fixture on the ashen horizon, beautiful to behold at a distance or when projected on-screen, but inside of which, no human being has ever survived long. Because for eons in its shadow, whole cultures have formed whose members live in simultaneous awe, reverence, & fear of its machinations, which—no matter how long we observe or how much we learn, no matter what insights are gleaned off cooled cores of igneous rock or what knowledge is fished from still pools of liquid sulfur—we will never fully master.

Anne Waldman, staring at past lives reflected in a mirror, notes "how we had passed through some ancient anxieties but it was important / That we were all still together changing." This is because love is a reciprocity of revelation & regret. Because love is a cup of the dead that we, the living, drink from. A dish filled with the blood of a savior, promising us eternity. A chalice into which we pour our regrets & then, blithely, sip.

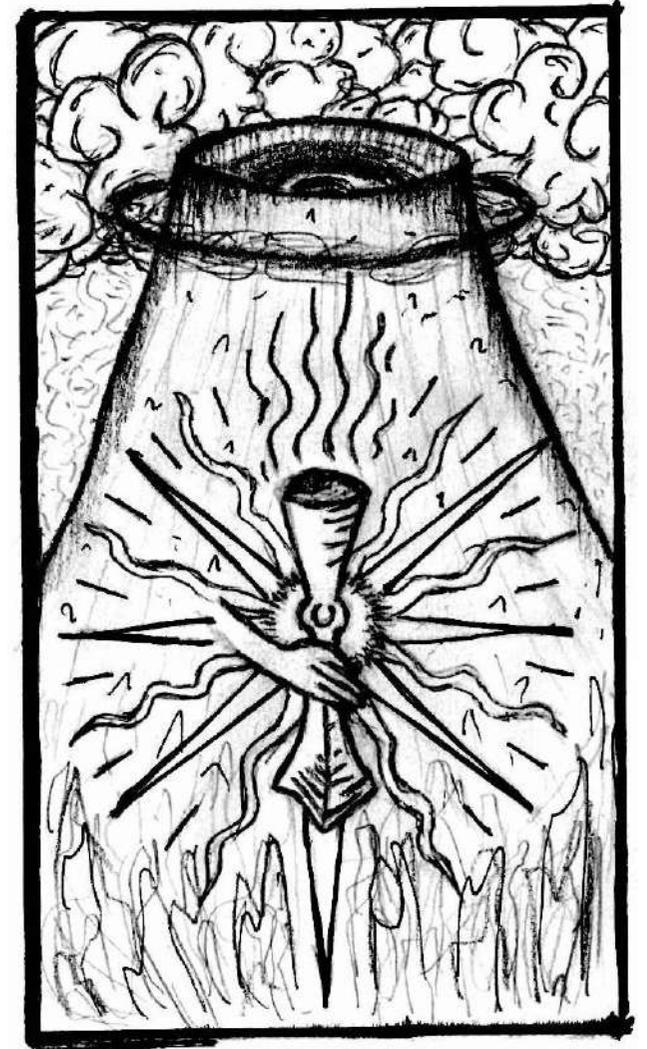
I think of Spicer: "If someone doesn't fight me I'll have to wear this armor / All of my life." I think of Maurice Krafft, desiring a "kamikaze existence in the beauty of volcanic things." Lives left lived & unlived aflame, turning to smoke. I write this sonnet:

If I could, I'd sit in the volcano
& admire the crater selfishly.
I'd eat rocks for survival, strip my clothes
to bathe on the acid lake. Gratefully

I'd fill my cup with fire—the throat burns
but what else can I drink? Pyroclastic
rubble floats on flaming tides as it turns
air to ember & my breaths erratic.

Alive in this mouth where the fumaroles
cloud my gaze, every thought, dream, & vision
filled by sulfides seeking the celestial
—the heart quakes, tremors to dispossession.

What sets the peak ablaze? What becomes of
bodies cast in ash, fixed forever in—



References

- Dosa, Sara, director. *Fire of Love*. National Geographic Documentary Films, Neon, 2022.
- Russell, Ron. "COLUMN ONE : In Pursuit of Deadly Volcanoes : Three Who Died in Japan's Eruption Belonged to an Elite Group Engaged in Daredevil Research Considered among the Most Glamorous & Dangerous in Science." *Los Angeles Times*, 25 June 1991, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1991-06-25-mn-1265-story.html>.
- Spicer, Jack, and Robin Blaser. "The Holy Grail." *The Collected Books of Jack Spicer*, Black Sparrow Press, Los Angeles, 1975, pp. 185–213.
- de Troyes, Chrétien, et al. *Perceval: The Story of the Grail*. Yale University Press, 1999.
- Waldman, Anne. "Let Go!" Lewis Warsh Memorial, 24 Apr. 2022, New York, NY, The Poetry Project at St. Mark's Church-In-The-Bowery.
- Waldman, Anne. "LET GO / for Lewis." *The Brooklyn Rail*, Mar. 2021, <https://brooklynrail.org/2021/03/poetry/LET-GO>.

Drawing by Barickman

Terrence Arjoon

Telomere Oubliette

I bury my sickness at sea
 and when I do so my life
 splits open like/the stern of a ship.
 This sea that we have
 is what's left,
 and they designated this cairn
 a "misfortune column," to commemorate
 the dead baker and his trees. At this
 column we split off and head south through the
 firs, smoke guiding the way.
 It went more smoothly
 then we thought, but now
 I wish I had a million hands
 like my mother,
 in beaming light emissions.

At Low-Tide

When I left I laughed loudly, so that people in the world
 might hear me—as I live on the far side of the river.
 For a while I wrote down the name of every living thing I saw:
 I read the rocks and their panegyrics,
 I read the crickets, the dirt, snakeskins, crystal texts that planetary boned
 and deloused. Pick up that flower from the table. What is it?
 wisteria? lupine? You don't know.
 There is in me now a wormlike moment.
 This movement makes me sweat painting clowns
 into the coral beneath my feet. This fossil coral reveals small flowers
 when lifted breath-swollen from a long night on my own,
 a fractured graze of light which renders, ultimately, as more martinis.
 The German photographer ordered one dirty, or, she was from
 the Southwest, but we agreed that there is no right time
 for the tide to drop, only that it just happens.

Reviews

The Pasolini Book by Stacy Szymaszek

Goliath Books, 2022

Review by Rebecca Teich

“Beauty is always contingent upon an impure precedent” — Pier Paolo Pasolini

Though most often referring to the generational transfer of property, wealth, and genetics, can there be forms of inheritance that pervert these very terms? In *The Pasolini Book*, Stacy Szymaszek writes perversions of a queer artistic inheritance. Such an artistic, political, queer inheritance might gesture to something both more inevitable and accidental than lineage or legacy imply. Szymaszek’s vision of inheritance is grounded in a generationally transmitted commitment to civic poetry, antifascist agitation, and queer public life. She takes up the life and poetry of Pier Paolo Pasolini, the transgressive poet, filmmaker, art critic, complicated leftist, and homosexual godfather rife with Italian dramatics, who Ara Merjian describes as “patron saint of aesthetic heresy” in his monograph on Pasolini, *Against the Avant-Garde: Pier Paolo Pasolini, Contemporary Art, and Neoliberalism*. The picket-fenced-in family drama is recast across nighttime cityscape cruising and desert desires which redistribute inheritance away from biological parents and towards the literary and political figure of Pasolini. Szymaszek’s Pasolini and Pasolini’s Szymaszek tread the line between foreparent and fantasmal contemporary, with Pasolini and Szymaszek both playing “poets who will never be parents / my words reveal the fantasy.” There is drama and performance in this fantasy: the show goes on and on.

This sense of legacy is akin to historical graffiti, where “the writer becomes a vandal.” Within this vandalism, Szymaszek performs a re-writing of lyric and life, at times crafting poems as counterparts to Pasolini’s, at other times crafting an [auto]biography as a counterpart and retelling of Pasolini himself, a hybridized mythopoesis and autopoiesis of both craft and life. These counterhistories travel through open undergrounds and counter/publics to facilitate exciting forms of solidarity; a butch dyke Dante follows a faggy Virgil down to the bathhouses, traipsing through both city-space and history: “I too am on the way to the baths / to make my longing public.”

The book shuttles between the brutal realism of the intimately everyday and mythic grandeur of narrative-lyric enmeshment with Pasolini. Its writing spans about sixteen years, while the narrative arc spans the author’s lifetime, folding Pasolini and his predecessors into her own. Typically, Szymaszek’s poetics feature a rigorous autopoiesis which becomes

the node by which the city, its socialities, and its strictures grow illuminated. Much of her oeuvre, such as *Hart Island* (2015), *A Journal of Ugly Sites* (2016), and *A Year From Today* (2018), is derived through a regimented note-taking, journalish-tic processes of documenting daily city life over the course of one or several consecutive years.

The Pasolini Book, on the other hand, leaps and bounds across time with temporal and geographic gaps peppering its making. Across time and space, there remains a devotional writing and rewriting. The first and final sections perform a “divine mimesis” where the foremost formal constraint is not a daily note-taking process but rather a lyric transfiguration of Pasolini’s *Roman Poems*—a process Szymaszek performs once in 2005 and then repeats in the pandemic desertscape of 2020. The middle section, “A Sentimental Education,” consists of a trifecta of time-stamped transcripts of a performance-lecture in prose she delivered on three separate occasions. Each version contains additions and redactions with the repeated lines faded to gray in the second and third iteration, and it gestures toward potential future revisions and performances.

In this middle section, we encounter not a contemporaneous-to-its-writing Szymaszek, but Szymaszek as an adultish, burgeoningly-butched child. The child who “didn’t cry,” who was “fettered by adult concerns,” and whose “first emotional experience” of butchness consisted of providing care: “My friends dove into my embrace—made happy by my amplitude.” Amidst the upsurge in use of terms such as “babyqueer” or “tenderqueer” which one could say infantilize adults and lower expectations for mature behavior due to a sort of social infancy, Szymaszek inverts the paradigm of the childish adult to reveal the unique nonconformity of the adult-like child. The nonlinear interplay between childhood, gender nonconformity, and queerness reveals this cruel world in which such children are viewed as “both a threat and in need of protection” while simultaneously obscuring and denying children’s autonomy—an all too relevant insight in the midst of the current fascistic onslaught against trans children.

Just as Szymaszek’s writing betrays a neat linearity, enacting historical swerves and recursiveness, so too does this section unsettle conventional autobiographic journeys from youth to maturity. The unchildlike child grows into the childless and “pensionless crone.” Pasolini was familiar with this topsy-turvy experience of age draped in queerness, paradoxically identifying both as an “adult fetus” and as having “contemporary oldness” which Szymaszek echoes in her claim that she “has seniority at 35 years.” Adult fetushood and contemporary oldness are not (merely) some fanciful notion of a queer temporality, but an intimate reckoning with the legal and social fictions that circumscribe and discipline what appropriate development and behavior looks like. Rejecting these oppressive plotlines, Szym-

The Mistletoe Bough

Laughing in a ditch next to my accountant

because I tricked her into adopting a mistletoe.

Clouds pass over and under, and through it,

and there was a cherry blossom, which come spring

I would weave around my head telling stories

and talking forever only a stone’s throw away from the

beginning of cinema. When a small chest,

and an attic, the rocks turned and hid their faces.

When an ocean of light or planetary body,

or a fibrous green leaf, the stars behind me grow

brighter. When that leaf, yet to receive a name,

no leopard shall discover my body. No printer

can dispose of me, who is only a wreath, and

who kept watch on this orchard, who stars

blessed his eating of peach pits, and fiery

pomegranate bodies.

maszek proclaims that she “live[s] to obliterate time with poetry” and I might argue she succeeds in that obliteration. She befuddles the “naturalized” trajectory from childish-child to adultish-adult, from past to present, from inherited predecessor to inheriting poet, while this book as a whole befuddles the temporality of her oeuvre.

Rather than a fissure from her other works, the entanglement of divinity and dailiness that undergird Syzmaszek’s ethos and aesthetic are brought into alchemical relief through exactly that deep faith in poetry’s transformative capacities. *The Pasolini Book* becomes a skeleton key for her entire oeuvre: a continuous and unfurling project grounded in poetic life, practice, and movement through and against time.

This is a document of both creative life and performance, an adultish childhood and a childless adulthood, a poetry of work and the work of poetry. Aesthetics becomes a way through space and time, enmeshed with the question of the civic poet: “There is the will to survive, which through grace becomes style.” The city becomes the cities of historical pasts and roving presents transposed through the watchful eye of the queer poet, chasing and making her Pasolini predecessor in the time-contorted public commons of poesy.

Yet, faith in what poetry can do does not mean a faith in all poetry. This book insistently contains the trappings of a life made of poetry and a poetry made of life; she takes seriously the phrase “my life’s work” at the interstices of one’s day job labors and artistic production, while refracting what constitutes the telling of a “life” and the limits of what is legitimized as work under capitalism. “Work” is a container of contradictions. On the one hand, nonprofit and arts industries pump out “relatable stories / for capital” via the labor of undervalued and undercompensated art workers. At the same time, Syzmaszek insists that poetry is work, often a thankless toil and necessary way of life that doesn’t cut a paycheck. And further, it is this thankless poetry that industry cannot monetize but that instead does the work of constructing “A world / that reveals itself in a language that threatens / the status quo.” Poetry documents and, in the same instant, transforms. Pasolini claimed “the sign under which I work is contamination” to which Syzmaszek responds in turn with a poetry “deformed not by their capital but through loving exclusion.” Her poetry draws to the fore contaminations that breed contradictions and loving exclusion so as to understand the source of its proliferative tensions, rather than merily accommodating a capitalist system that creates and absorbs contraction. In other words: let this perverse and contradictory inheritance of Pasolini remain deliciously perverse.

When writing is a way of life, then the book-object becomes a historical thin slice of that life—aggregated of and in torsion from the past, unresolved into an ever fungible, improvisable future. There is hope here: things

might be different then just as things are different now. The endlessly repeated-and-revised book casts itself into a speculative future. This book-object both bristles against pinned-down finality and offers up snapshotted moments. It contains the project’s possibility of continuation, enlivens past publication, and refuses the book to live under the sign of the deadened historical object. *The Pasolini Book* instead signifies a simmering ground of what might be to come, entangled now in our own perverted inheritance in an obliterated time.

***Villainy* by Andrea Abi-Karam**

Nightboat Books, 2021

Review by Vani Natarajan

Where does the idea of the villain begin? I am suspicious of origin stories, but etymologies leave traces and threads that compel me. In dictionaries, I find references to medieval Europe, to the “villain” as an epithet feudal lords used to suppress agricultural workers. Silvia Federici links the figure of the villain with witches actively resisting enclosure. Sylvia Wynter writes on the 16th century European emergence of the racialized figure of the villain, signifying “the very Lack of the human,” defined against whiteness, defined as under. I think about the “villain” as a container for all of an oppressor’s anxieties, a trope repeated and with dire material consequences for people whose existence threatens a fascist social order. To be a villain is to live an endangered existence, but to be imagined as the source of danger. To be villainized carries the pressure to somehow establish you are not, to invoke the heroic instead. And then, there is a way to refuse these terms. What might be found in villainy, on and under its surfaces?

Andrea Abi-Karam’s *Villainy* opens with a vision of what “THE END OF FASCISM LOOKS LIKE,” and my heart races in anticipation at “CENTURIES OF QUEERS” rejoicing at the true demise of the violent structures and forces that have been killing us, have been trying to destroy us or co-opt us (both/and, really), and have taken from us those we love and those we’ve never had the chance to share space with face to face (but will one day, dancing on fascism’s graves). I will quote here as the book lists these forces, finally interred, in no uncertain terms:

THE END OF FASCISM LOOKS LIKE
CENTURIES OF QUEERS
DANCING ON THE GRAVE OF

1. CAPITALISM
2. THE STATE
3. COLONIALISM
4. NAZIS
5. RACISM
6. OPPRESSION

The pages that follow guide the reader into an effervescent dream party, a “REVELRY OF QUEERNESS AND DESIRE THAT WE

HAVE ONLY NOW / JUST BARELY BEGUN TO IMAGINE,” haptically and visually alive with collective pleasure. And soon after, a scene of fisting inside a cold room that may suggest a gallery or an archive. Here, sex summons the dead, and the speaker welcomes looming insomnia as a portal into a warm and protected space for those they have lost. Bodies hold both grief and desire. I am moved by the poet’s attention to this, remembering how intensely restricted and policed expressions of both can be, for people of color, for trans and queer people, for all those whose lives the state tries to disappear.

As Abi-Karam writes in their dedication, “for those who were taken too soon,” I think of those I know and grieve and those I never had the chance to meet, whose passing haunts me. Grief in this book operates intimately and structurally all at once. The dream party rendered above brings me to a future tense that is not so much held out at an indefinite utopian horizon line as urgently near-now, rubbing up against the present, and older than now, inheriting imaginaries and survival strategies of those who came before.

The poet arranges *Villainy* into multiple parts, eight larger section titles listed in a table of contents in bold, all-caps type that makes me imagine a set list for a punk show for which I desire a perpetual return. This list appears after a first, unnamed section. Architecturally, the book refuses a totalizing scheme; many poem and section titles do not appear listed on this page. This choice is thrilling and could perhaps formally echo lines from the poem “Hold My Hand” that resound for me long after I read: “refuse the archive / demand the / immediacy.” What could it mean to write a book that defies the logic of containment? Or, as the poet writes in “What Is Closed / What Is Contained,” “What does it mean to contain something like a piece of land / a country / a nation / a body like a pair of bodies / a pile of bodies / a set of words between two covers”?

I can’t write about my encounter with *Villainy* simply in terms of reading it. I feel that this book is reading me, reading us, in the most urgent and necessary ways. *Villainy* unceasingly invites us to confront where we place our bodies, voices, capacities to feel and act—how and where we will move, with whom—in struggles against fascism, in the risks and pleasures of queer life we are fashioning. *Villainy* insists on the space made by and for those who came before, and also by implication, those who have yet to come. And *Villainy* also contends with archival power: the documented, the deleted, the disavowed.

In their afterword, Abi-Karam situates their writing through grief around these named horrors: The 2016 Ghost Ship Fire in Oakland, and the 2017 Muslim Ban. These moments and their legacies, traumas that extend beyond any limited date range, reverberate through the book, through a motif of disappearance, of deletion. I consider the lines:

“B/C THE PHOTOS FROM ABU GHRAIB GOT DELETED / B/C OUR RELATIONSHIPS TO EACH OTHER ARE DOCUMENTED” and I’m struck by how quickly carceral and military violence encrypts and erases its own traces. There is also the active disavowal that archival power sustains, as with art institutions that “continue to support murderers like Carl Andre & forget people who were actually important like Ana Mendieta.” And still, I read in these intense confrontations with archival violence, a space for counter-memory to sear through lies and omissions, even as *Villainy* contends with the thorniness of being an archivist of one’s own digital presence, of wanting to both document and delete.

“I GOT LOST / I GOT DELETED,” an ekphrastic piece after Ana Mendieta’s films, guides us through a visceral confrontation with these questions, moving through the ache of wondering how one’s life will be remembered and taken up, and to what end. What parts will be erased or bleached or held under a microscope, what traces could be left that extend beyond the outline of a life? I read an aesthetic resistance in the lines “I RUB MESSAGES INTO THE WALL / IN HOPES I CAN BE FOUND AGAIN.” I feel a longing for connection across the lines of life and death, a twining of grief with desire.

Villainy calls upon many voices as it confronts what poetry can’t, on its own, bring into being in revolutionary struggle. The last section “POETRY AS FORCES” closes with an opening, drawing on Cecilia Vicuña’s concept of poetry as “made of forces.” The speaker poses questions, “how to weaponize the poem words as weapons,” echoing Vicuña’s *Palabraromas*, and introduces an enticing charge, to “give the poem teeth.” To weaponize this toothy poetry, then, requires contact. Teeth can be sharp, can pierce and break, and also, vitally, might act as sensory receptors. The poem gives teeth in a way that no single mouth can contain, and it’s through collective action (the riot, the blockade, the street dance party) that this language enacts. The collective capacity for action brings on a collective proprioception.

This is a book that insists on feeling, emotionally and sensorily, on what both surfaces and interiors teach. Many parts that stay with me immerse in the haptic: wetness and viscosity (cum, mouths, makeup mingled in sweat and smudged between dancing bodies, “uhaul dyke grime”), sharpnesses (teeth, as in the mouth or also in zippers, broken glass, spiky heels, rocks), brushes of the ethereal and atmospheric (heat, coolness, smoke), and the earth itself, the softness/hardness of leather, of skin. Too, the violent edges and interiors of the fortress, the prison, the border, the ways these could cut even/especially as one tries to break through and past.

The ekphrastic address that pulses through this book finds clear naming in the invocation

of artists and writers, from Frantz Fanon to David Wojnarowicz, to Ana Mendieta and Cecilia Vicuña. I also read an ekphrasis between the book's stunning cover art, a photograph by artist Lix Z., and the book's words. Without knowing anything about the media or process behind the image, I want to try and write about what I notice: a play between opacity and translucency, and a strong sense of textures, perhaps raindrops, metal chains, sharp protrusions, and a glitchy technique of portrait cut, a visual unbecoming. The imagery of the cover art repeats and transforms in the inlays between the book's sections. The play between opacity and translucency suggests radiography or other imaging techniques normally employed to surveil and control, but reworked and reimaged to resist those logics. I think of how queer and trans artists of color are often fashioning resistance in optical interstices, with bodies in streets or other spaces remade and unmade. I return to the book's title and think of history's villainized, communities that the state and other orders try to contain within the damning figure of the villain. *Villainy* loosens away from villain-as-identity and moves towards forces, energy transfers, and what collectivity engages and reworks in struggle. Refusing optic reduction, staying tactically capacious, in pursuit of another world.

***Sousveillance Pageant* by Emily Abendroth**
Radiator Press, 2021

Review by Rob Halpern

ABOLITION DRAG

If "surveillance" describes that which watches from above (be it the state, the police, a financial institution, or a private data tracker), then "sousveillance" describes that which watches from below (fixing an unflinching eye upon power and its mechanisms).

In *Sousveillance Pageant*, Emily Abendroth has crafted a stunning "masque" for the abolitionist imagination. If a generic designation is useful for this poet's novelesque defiance of genre, then "masque" fits the bill. It suggests pantomime and play, disguise and public scandal, while chafing at the segregation of dance and critique. Shelley's great "Masque of Anarchy" comes to mind, with its clarion alarm to arouse the "many" toward insurrectionary ends:

*Rise, like lions after slumber
In unvanquishable number!
Shake your chains to earth like dew
Which in sleep had fallen on you:
Ye are many—they are few!*

Abendroth even provides her reader with a literal mask to cut with scissors out of the book's final pages—"the fugitive, but handsome, Beldings ground squirrel facemask," to be precise!—by which we are invited to disguise ourselves in order both to scramble the technologies that would otherwise identify us "from above," be it for predatory, monetary, or

punitive ends, while enabling those who choose to wear the mask to recognize one another "from below," as it were, for "We must watch from below—this you already know. But we must not only watch. We must also watch out for one another and we must act, wreaking havoc upon their notions of a 'manageable' populace, testing out every single unexpected site of resistance."

*p.p.s. Please ask me if I will wear the mask.
Answer: I will wear the mask.*

There's an implicit solicitation to the reader here: Please say you'll join the pageant, dress up for the drag show, be part of the scandal, the conspiracy—the plain old breathing-together—that is, the solidarity.

But what's a "sousveillance pageant"? I'd say it's a playful masquerade that belies the difference between the invisible and the flamboyant:

The line between the 'unseen' and 'ostentatious' has perhaps never been so slender nor the reading of it more bendable, proposing the end of both the non-consensual, roving camera drone and the motion-sensitive doorwell probe alike.

It's a form that allows one to bear public witness while wresting away from police and capital alike the knowledge-producing power otherwise used to classify, punish, or fleece us. Like a tightly packed coil waiting to spring, Abendroth's title works like a condensed little poem that communicates the work the book sets out to accomplish—its direct aims, as well as its aimless vagaries. It suggests what Black feminist scholar Simone Browne calls "dark sousveillance" to connote an "imaginative place from which to mobilize a critique of racializing surveillance, a critique that takes form in anti-surveillance, countersurveillance, and other freedom practices" (that's Browne). And then there's the "pageant," suggesting here a public display or carnival that inverts hierarchical social functions, inviting the reader to be a trickster in the game, not just a spectator.

Sousveillance Pageant is also the eponymous name of the book's central character—often referred to as "The Pageant," or just plain "Sous." This isn't the sort of character one finds in mainstream fiction, but more like an organizing principle devoted to the work of disrupting, if not sabotaging a whole range of surveillance systems. In doing so, "Sous" apprentices herself to a rich catalog of artworks and actions—from *The House that Herman Built* by Herman Wallace (of the Angola 3) and Jackie Sumell, to Hito Steyerl's film *November*, from Trevor Paglen's *Blank Spots on the Map*, to the "Poets' Security Force" (of the Feminist Economics Department)—creating liberating effects along the way, at once destructive and joyful, from disruptions of facial recognition software to interventions in FISA courts and parole boards. This is a poetics of scrambling the system, the aim of which is to turn "Signal-to-Noise"—the drag name of another of the book's "characters"—rendering

otherwise readable biometrics and ID cards, credit scores and shopping carts, as something more closely resembling "the androgynous mascot for Dadaist wainscoting." Sous also has a brother, "Inverted Opticality," who is "permanently imprisoned" and "now stationed in the solitary housing unit, in enhanced confinement for defiant deportment." Abendroth reminds us of the Orwellian confusion here: "In this context, 'enhanced' is always translated as 'further deprived'—given that every protection one petitions for becomes a cause and justification for amplified institutional retaliation." Abendroth's collaborative activism with folks living inside Pennsylvania prisons informs all her writing and, as a founding member of the Coalition to Abolish Death by Incarceration (otherwise known as "life without parole"), as well as the co-founder of Lifelines: Voices Against the Other Death Penalty (see lifelines-project.org), she is committed to abolishing this context.

All the interconnected technologies of identification, policing, extraction, and punishment that Abendroth's "Sous" desires to disrupt or sabotage are integral to the functioning of both incarceration and capitalism. In this regard, *Sousveillance Pageant* makes an imaginative contribution to a growing body of interdisciplinary and intersectional work among scholars, activists, and artists committed to "a political vision with the goal of eliminating imprisonment, policing, and surveillance." This is the work of *abolition* as it arouses and organizes resistance to "the migration of carcerality from brick-and-mortar jails and prisons to the places in everyday life where surveillance and punitive control dominate other aspects of the state's enterprise."¹

Jackie Wang's *Carceral Capitalism* (Semiotexte, 2018) is useful here because it examines some of those "places in everyday life" characterized by predatory identification, data mining, and algorithmic policing, whose constricting horizons *Sousveillance Pageant* aims to destroy. In this sense, Abendroth's writing suggests what Wang refers to as an abolitionist "counter-spell," or an imaginative form "powerful enough to break the prison's stranglehold on our imagination." For Wang, "the prison itself is a problem for thought that can only be unthought using a mode of thinking that does not capitulate to the realism of the prison" (Wang's emphasis). Both Abendroth and Wang are poets, and I think they'd agree that this "mode of thinking" is nothing less than poetry. No doubt, to argue that the imagination—let alone poetry—has the power to dis-abuse us of the prison's violent abuses risks hyperbole, mystification, or "enchantment," as if incarceration were nothing but a fiction born of "mind-forg'd manacles" that could be dispelled by a poem like brain fog. Wang not only takes that risk, she ups the ante when she asks, "Can the re-enchantment of the world be an instrument that we use to shatter the realism of the prison?" That "re-enchantment" calls for the most non-instrumental of instruments, a musical instrument, or a poem

whereby the unrecognizable and the over-the-top converge. Such an instrument, of which *Sousveillance Pageant* is a full-blown illustration, opens a space for thinking about abolition itself as a poetics of doing by undoing, knowing by unknowing, making by unmaking that creates a place in language from which to imagine a world without prisons, and the practices to bring that world into being.

In the postscript to her collection of poems, *Exclosures* (Ahsahta 2014), Abendroth writes that "one goal of our contemporary poetics must, of necessity, be to sound out the catastrophic and debilitating reverberations" of our contemporary lifeworld. This "sounding out" proposes the poem as an instrument for conducting what otherwise goes unheard, not because it's not loud enough, but because that "vibrational experience" (Wang's term) lacks recognizable form. This is where poetry and abolition converge, as they both risk the failure of normative modes of perception, challenging us to unlearn the ways we're taught to see and hear. "Recognition" is among the unacknowledged problems *Sousveillance Pageant* takes on. Given our many pleas to be recognized, and the ethical imperative those pleas assume, what happens when that demand echoes those of capital, state, and police? What happens when our commitment to recognize others slips on a willingness to be identified, as the logic of identity gets tethered to motivations less hopeful than individual affirmation?

Abendroth's response might be something like: Recognition, yes, but not this recognition:

Not the crisp march of hidden cameras and multiplying spywares arising at every corner and wearing away at the vulnerability of one's edges. Not this copious documentation and ceaseless registration which is aimed always at scrutiny and which operates with an unflagging presumption of permanent guilt or criminality.

Rather,

a form of recognition that would honor our complexities; that would give picture to our unique dexterities, weaknesses, and rigidities; holding us accountable for each, in the belief that we might also transform them.

In her turn away from the transparency necessary for easy identification, Abendroth turns to Zach Blas's *Facial Recognition Suite* and the *Fag Face Mask*, "which poses the power of Queer Opacity, 'a form of queer politics concerned with the unrecognizable, with cultivating forms of living otherwise'" (that's Abendroth quoting Blas). Like a strange affirmation of our failure to recognize, this poetics of opacity—complementing that of Édouard Glissant's *Poetics of Relation*—is critical to the work of abolition, opening up new spaces of possibility and freedom, and with them, new ways of imagining a future that refuses to capitulate to the realism of the present.

And so, we're drawn back to the beginning, the orbit of the theatrical pageant, the masque where one's costume unsettles the accustomed eye determined to see only what has been ordained to be seen:

In other words, you saw something all right, you were audaciously pointed towards it even and yet you still couldn't make heads or tails of what it was you saw.

Forced into a confrontation with the resolutely inassimilable.

And every single fierce or fabulous, queer or Afro-futurist punk rocker who is reading this page today hardly needs an historical example or elaborate preamble in order to conjure the contours of such means.

It simply means that you, as one part of the world, change the world as it is seen.

¹Angela Davis, Gina Dent, Erica R. Meiners, and Beth E. Richie, *Abolition. Feminism. Now.* (Haymarket 2022).

Chasers by Stephen Ira
New Michigan Press, 2022
Review by Zach Ozma

SUMMER OF THE CHASER

The thing is, I remember even up until 2012 or so, it seemed really experimental for transsexuals to write lyric poetry.

In the summer of 2012, I met Stephen Ira in a free poetry workshop for queer youth run by the Seattle parks department. At 19 I was the oldest queer youth by a number of years, seething with discomfort, home for summer for the last time, getting ready to leave my first love. I was thinking about not coming back to the workshop. Then, finally, a guest poet I could RELATE to. Swishy and confident, Ira read us selections from Kevin Killian's *Action Kylie*. I thought it was all really experimental. I stayed, and wrote poems.

In the summer of 1973, Lou Sullivan's essay *A Transvestite Answers a Feminist* asked "Who can have a 'deep satisfying love' under these conditions?" The thing is, I remember even up until 2012 or so, it seemed really experimental for transsexuals to be loved.

Theoretically, experiments go one of two ways: it is proven, it is not proven. In life, the act of experimenting and the idea of the experimental evoke murkier territory: We can't know what these experimental drugs will do to the children! Oh, she's experimenting with gender. He's experimenting with men. She's experimenting with women. It's normal to experiment! They're experimenting with hormones. Think of it as a sexual experiment! This is too experimental. It's kind of a social experiment. Experimental pill causes some to regrow nearly a full head of hair! Gender experiments

conducted in public schools.

In the summer of 2022 on grindr the ftms want to experiment with the cis men, and the cis men want to experiment with the ftms, and the baby ftms want to experiment with the actualized ftms, and some of the non-binaries want to experiment with the ftms because they might be ftms later, and some of the non-binaries want to experiment with the ftms for the usual reasons, and many of the mtfs want to experiment with having a deep and satisfying love with the ftms, and sometimes the people get what they want. On my knees in Fairmount Park there is no difference between me and any other type of man.

In experimenting we reach beyond what we are. The experiment reaches forward, seeks to know more, seeks a different condition and so creates it. Whether or not something is proven, we are changed in the act of experimenting. That's queer futurity baby.

It hardly seems experimental for transsexuals to write lyric poetry now. In 2013 we got *Troubling the Line: Trans and Genderqueer Poetry and Poetics*. In 2015, the first issue of *Vetch: a magazine of trans poetry and poetics* (co-edited by Ira). In 2020, *We Want It All: An Anthology of Radical Trans Poetics*. In the summer of 2022, I know dozens of trans poets. You actually cannot throw a chap without hitting one (*Why does anything I say sound like I don't like it? I like it.*)

For trans poets and those who love them, Stephen Ira has been a household name for a number of years. His generous linguistic precision, humor, light hand and right timing have made him an icon for a certain niche transfagpoet crowd. He's the guy we trust to say gracefully the thing we are struggling to give words. It's actually obscene that this is his first book. *Chasers* records the burgeoning love between a cisgender man (Chris) and a transsexual man, the photographer and the poet, the chaser and the chased. A deeply sexy book, and an extremely timely one, *Chasers* gets at the present tensions between queer cis and trans people, and their shared tensions with the straight world.

The book opens with my pick for the hit single, "The Cis People," telling us "they seemed to have appeared so suddenly" and "There were no cis people. Considered intersectionally, the theory did not make sense." Right off the bat, Ira lets us know we won't be engaging in a typical cis-on-trans gender ethnography. In the world of *Chasers* (and indeed sometimes in the real world), transsexuals are the center and cis people are the constitutive outside.

Does it still seem experimental for transsexuals to be loved? The cis people I know whose lives are most entangled with the trans people they love are the ones most afraid to be accused of being chasers or fetishists. They worry they or their lover will be infantilized or

medicalized—"All 'terms' make me feel like a child, a doctor, or a child doctor, Doogie Houser, Freddie Highmore, I hate it, I hate it!"—no one wants to be told that their deep, satisfying love is based on objectification. No one wants to be an object *all* the time. They worry they will be accused of living in a world of fantasy (and in their moments away from the hateful public, are they not in a world of fantasy? Isn't any pair of lovers?).

We find *Chasers*' lovers in lush dreamscapes, in the half-flight of the alders, a house deep in the woods, on the moon, and sometimes absent from each other. In these moments of separation, I think of Felix Gonzalez-Torres's empty bed billboards, language pooling up in his absent indentation on the pillow.

My favorite poems ground in the real: the crowded sands of Jacob Riis beach, in bed, upstairs at the leather bar, folding towels, in the car listening to *Love Line*. In the poem "Love Line," Ira pinpoints unglamorous tasks as integral to the chaser's love for the chased:

...how you knew
when you saw
the first you saw
(God rest her soul), that life
would take a turn now,
and you'd spend it
driving us to appointments,
wiping up vomit,
helping us move.

These lovers are deeply specific people and could not be any cis/trans couple. Yet, *Chasers* shows the pitfalls of imagining any relationship could be free of its larger social context. If a book of love poems can be said to have a political project, Ira's project is most clear in "Poem":

I loved him so much
my heart flew out
of all frameworks for power
I knew, and I thought
he was different and I
waited to find out
what that meant, but given
time, discovered
he's not different, they're just not
all the same, and that
was terrifying, terrifying news.

The Frank O'Hara comparison is clear, not just from the title "Poem" but the conversational everyday nature of Ira's voice, and the named cast of friends, acquaintances, and celebrities. These lovers ramble through an ecosystem of deviants famous and intimate: the two men in his whole town who remind him of life (they've never met), Bernadette Peters as Dot in *Sunday In The Park with George*, Mackenzie, Liam, Nathan Lane, Chartreuse, Kevin, Mark, Will, Nicki Minaj, Dr. Drew, boys to put your fist inside. A many gendered cast, with the world of gay men and transsexuals at the core. *Chasers* reflects not just the extant presence of trans men within the sphere of gay men's sex-

uality, but of cis people within the sphere of trans sexuality.

If we get comfortable with the idea that a sex act may take many forms and that each of those configurations can signify an endless number of meanings to its participants and observers, then we may encounter desire as complex. It's not all tops and bottoms, poles and holes, "cis people just walk[ing] around fucking everyone with their huge stuff." If we can encounter sexual desire as complex we may see all sex as experimental, all participants and observers in a state of experimenting.

You don't get too far without finding it all slipping around. Lubricated, we stretch into previously impossible configurations. Ira's *Chasers* is doing lubricant work to the places gay men and transsexual men rub up against each other. And they do rub. Gay cisgender men have been sucking, fucking, living, and loving with and alongside gay transsexual men for a long time. We're not so different, and anyway there aren't that many watering holes anymore (and a hole is a hole is a hole).

If we get comfortable with the idea that we come together as gay men in endless configurations, who are we to deny the allure of the chaser? The chaser is always reaching forward, the chaser's chase oriented always toward desire. What is it that the chaser chases with such relentless want? It must be very beautiful, let's follow and see for ourselves. Look out lovers, the transsexuals may be chasing you.

In case you haven't noticed, the culture wars are on again, transsexuals are in play, and everybody's right to privacy and bodily autonomy is on the line. Some are loath to say it, but we need our allies close. *Chasers*, please love trans people so much your heart flies out of all frameworks for power you know.

I'm calling it: 2022 is the Summer of the Chaser. It's hot out, we're all curious about each other's bodies, who is what matters both more and less than we remember it mattering, the fascists are encroaching, let's experiment, let's fall in love!

Phone Bells Keep Ringing for Me by Choi Seungja | Action Books, 2020
Review by imogen xtian smith

Choi Seungja's poems stare straight into the shadows rimming life's spiral, sparking cigarette after cigarette—inhale > exhale > acidic wheeze & repeat until the body sinks first from daydream, then material reality, & finally, into the all enveloping grasses, home to worm & bone. The poems in *Phone Bells Keep Ringing for Me* (Action Books)—deftly translated by Won-Chung Kim & Cathy Park Hong, retaining every sharp edge & washed out vision—unveil a poet obsessed with fingering through the despair of her solitude, anticipating the rot that both awaits & reanimates us. People recoil at the matter that matters most,

present just below the surface & waiting for the perfect storm to summon skinside. Not Choi, who through three decades of poems becomes an oracle of bile, spit, ooze, piss, puss. Her verse transforms her own loneliness, & ours—we become as a worthless dog alongside her, licking scraps from bone in the pit of the world.

“Already I was nothing: / mold formed on stale bread, / trail of piss stains on the wall, / a maggot-covered corpse / a thousand years old.” Feels that way sometimes, & from these opening lines Choi submerges the reader in a menagerie of cut glass, moldy clouds, peeling rooms, scuzzy streets free of friends. A human, Choi reminds us, is an animal, subject to cycles of birth > grandiosity > failure > decay. No season is spared. Autumn catches syphilis & the poem delivers it straight to your brain, vis-à-vis the act of reading.

Forms come & go, dissolve into language, earth, ether. In the tedium of time’s passage (our earth-bound fate, prone as we are to failure & disappointment in relation to a society’s demands for productivity), we wait & want after a wholeness that’s nebulous at best. Choi announces a nothingness made resonant in language—language that likewise animates rot. Is the “I,” the “we,” the “they” just a rumor let loose by tongues, revised & maintained unto darkness through words?

Doubles haunt our fraying visions & trajectories. No amount of misery or joie de vivre will avert any self from destiny—a grave of nouns. Human life is haunted life, full of sun & smirking mirth—“nicotine congealing in alcohol / like syphilis germs flowing through veins, / like death gripping life.”

Choi’s lines oscillate from vivid description of the putrefaction & loneliness at the center of being to curt observations, leaving the eyes papercut:

To not be lonely,
I eat a lot.
To not be in pain,
I have a little drink.
To not dream,
I swallow sleeping pills.
Finally, I turn off
the switch to my brain.

Living well, which is to say, with a numbing sense of joy & achievement, requires of us an indulgence rendering life slightly slanted, a peripatetic danse macabre where the dead are invisible while battering us with wind.

Thus with Choi Seungja. Born into an authoritarian South Korea—a country ruled first on Confucian ethics & later, gross capital—in the early fifties, Choi became one of the most important feminist writers of her generation, railing against roles (what i’ve called *desires*) the state foisted upon her. What is free will? What value can possibly come from a childless, unmarried woman poet in a

world such as this? Choi answers, half in a dream of death throws, with a fluency of bile, a smearing of shit, an endless corridor both haunted & drained of time & love.

Time moves mumly, “the hot secret codes of these days...in which death is followed by another death.” Yet there are moments of reaching, fleeting love & animal embrace, clouds shifting in shape to puncture ache. In poems like “Release,” we encounter our doubles, stranded in infinities of corners that, while casting large shadows, might also offer up their own chaotic becomings. For the poem to exist, there must remain a sweetness, however ephemeral, sustaining the speaker before she’s devoured by night.

Hey, who is that over there
who waits at my door
throughout my life.
Now at last I know you aren’t my enemy,
come inside whenever you want.

Choi invites us beyond the truncation of her poems (“short as a shriek”) into the land of her long longings: “The age for lyric is over” she writes, “and only the age for / practicing lyrics / remain.” This practice, somatic, looks a lot like fear & trembling, fear & loneliness, fear & a carton of smokes, fear & cirrhosis of the liver, fear of womb, tomb, ghost children floating out all sorts of holes. Whether we’re powerful or seeping at the margins, the body sloughs on, “(i)n name and in reality...the house of destruction.”

And so, a nation drains you. A gender drains you. Domesticity drains you & poetry too. Children or the barren womb? Either way—leaking substance. This is the humanness of which Choi’s poems gesture. Aberrations abound & are sticky. However we’re born, we’re born to anonymity, a nobodiness swallowed in dull, white horizon, miniscule points in the unspool of history—

courageously I arrive at a thought
that may be abandoned again.
Even so, poetry is a way.
But the way is not opened yet
and I have to chart it out by myself.

Late in *Phone Bells*..., we encounter a cluster of poems entitled “Not Forgetting or Memorandum,” functioning as a kind of guidebook for living. It makes for grim reading that feels more & more certain of itself as time passes:

For no reason, the years threw shit
ruthlessly in front of me and behind me,
into my mind and my body, too.
Those unchanging years
which couldn’t even flow away
fed me shit
and left me mercilessly
alive.

Here, a litany of fact. Life in the world is the life of a woman. When sorrow comes, there is only the body, which never defects entirely. To

love amongst the shit flinging is to become fatal—outstripping whatever concepts of materiality carry the day & limping through the endless sky.

book of the other: small in comparison by

Truong Tran | Kaya Press, 2021

Review by Kirby Chen Mages

I am writing this essay sitting beside an anonymous white male that I long to murder...I felt a “killing rage.”...With no outlet, my rage turned to overwhelming grief and I began to weep...The white man seated next to me watched suspiciously whenever I reached for my purse. As though I were the black nightmare that haunted his dreams, he seemed to be waiting for me to strike, to be the fulfillment of his racist imagination. I leaned towards him with my legal pad and made sure he saw the title written in bold print: “Killing Rage.”... I did not kill the white man on the plane even though I remain awed by the intensity of that desire. I did listen to my rage, allow it to motivate me to take pen in hand and write in the heat of that moment.

—bell hooks, from *killing rage: Ending Racism*

The above circumstances in which bell hooks arrived at her essay “Killing Rage: Militant Resistance” remind me of how Truong Tran came to write *book of the other: small in comparison*, in that they are both direct responses to the emotions of anger and rage that arose from racialized incidents. For Tran, *book of the other* explicitly and repeatedly makes reference to a discrimination lawsuit he filed against his employer after being denied a tenure track professorship for the third time in his twelve years of working for the same university. The person who received the tenure position instead of Tran was a white man with no experience teaching graduate students, who also happened to be the husband of the department chair. He was chosen by a panel of three white faculty members. As Bhanu Kapil describes in the book’s introduction, *book of the other* is Tran’s response to “a workplace experienced as obliterating, populated, and racist in both commonplace and overt ways” (5). It would take Tran ten years to arrive at the point where he could write about the incident, though he has made it clear that the book is not intended to speak solely to the experiences of racism in academia, but rather, the accumulative weight of microaggressions at large. The “weight of carrying someone else’s shame” (65), and how this havoc wreaked on the body manifests itself through language:

when you wake up one morning from years of silence. when your voice is not yours. you reclaim your voice. one sentence. one line. one word. at a time. when you write. you tell. you document a story. when you give up. you begin. when you begin again. you write. you tell. you document this story. when this is your story. when this is the way. you will find a way back. (24)

To release this weight, which appears in mul-

tiples throughout the book (rocks in pockets, a hoisted bag of rice, bricks, sand, and the obsession with oversized bags to contain it all), Tran must construct his own language. He cannot write in the language of those he refers to in the book as “dear white.” Here, again, I am reminded of *killing rage*, in which hooks writes, “Confronting my rage, witnessing the way it moved me to grow and change, I understood intimately that it had the potential to destroy but also to construct.” This is precisely how it feels to read *book of the other* from start to finish. And then read it again. And again. There is a constant dismantling, a constant reconstruction, a need to pull oneself out of the suffocating rubble, “you are buried beneath. a lifetime of these things” (33). And so, it’s encouraging that the book ends with a section titled “the book of beginning.” It reminds us that we are always rebuilding. And it’s only fitting that Tran would find himself employing the period as his sole punctuation mark of choice: “this period as a tool of utilitarian function. to dig. to break things down. the period as a verb. punching ones way through. in that same logic. it is a weapon” (137). It is through this device that he’s able to return to his voice:

that you lead me back. periods on the page. that ive come to believe. that i am the owner of this language. in all its imperfections. it is mine. and i am free. to do with it. as i see fit. this idea of owning a language. (142)

In *book of the other*, Tran seeks to hoard, claim, borrow, and steal language to make it criminal. He holds himself implicit. He charges himself as guilty—of being silent, of wanting to belong, of carrying other people’s shame. These are his crimes—the crimes of being a poet, of being other, of being a motherfucker. And yet, nothing compares to the crimes of dear white, the true crimes of discrimination, of those motherfuckers.

Tran says he is the prisoner. Tran says he has a spoon. He uses the spoon to dig a tunnel, but once he makes his way out, he is met with more walls. This is the nature of the book. Guilty of obsessiveness. Guilty of relentless retelling of facts. He writes that “this anger over time. becomes like muscle memory in the body” (218). We feel him enacting this exhaustive, rote movement: “this is not. the performance of outrage. of anger. of otherness. this is anger.” The use of the period is the digging. The burrowing deeper into fact, memory, sentence, anger.

When it comes to the limitations of language, Tran seems to distrust the question mark above all else. The question can be used as a means of avoidance. dismissal. erasure. In this document, this “reporting of a crime,” this “autopsy”—he lays the questions bare, exposing them for the statements they truly are. The mark of a question could imply that there is no answer. It connotes an uncertainty. In *book of the other*, Tran is focused on stating the facts—that which is “entirely true” (55) and that

which is “essentially false” (51). He wants it to be made clear: that he is angry. That he has been discriminated against. That people are continually being discriminated against. That this will continue happening unless we, the other, speak up:

dear white. this is not a comfortable text. that you are uncomfortable in reading this text. that i am uncomfortable in writing this text. that we must do this you and i. that we must sit with the discomfort. that with all this language. there is still this discomfort of the silence in between. (107)

hooks writes that “censoring militant response to race and racism ensures that there will be no revolutionary effort to gather that rage and use it for constructive social change...All our silences in the face of racist assault are acts of complicity.” And still, we must build with “these bricks made of words” (188). These bricks are sometimes rendered faulty, inadequate. We sometimes realize that we have built a wall with these bricks and no light can shine in. Then we must punch out every other brick to make a latticed pattern:

it. is. not. that. you. want. to. take. what. is. within. take. it. out. into. the. world. share. what. is. not. wanted. it. is. not. that. no. that. is. not. the. agenda. at. all. you. are. on. the. outside. you. are. forging. this. crude. and. blunt. instrument. heavy. in. your. hands. you. are. using. the. blunt. force. of. this. instrument. breaking. down. walls. only. to. be. confronted. by. more. walls. within. when. you. arrive. at. a. room. still. standing. within. ruins. (201)

This is the architecture of anger. While Tran speaks of his anger and outrage outright, what seems to be hiding between the lines—or more accurately, in the gaps between the truncated starts and stops of the exhaustive excavation of memory, thought, and feeling, made palpable through his relentless use of periods—is a deep well of grief. Underneath the anger there is always the well.

What ultimately called Tran to write *book of the other* was his feeling that he was living a lie with his students. He recognized that while he was professing for them to use their voices, he remained silent. The book makes multiple references to Tran’s life as a teacher. The book itself is dedicated to his students. More than anything, he offers this book as a gift:

i have only this to give. im giving it to you. the you who is inside this book. the you who is reading this. the you who is silent. the you that is i. i am giving you this. this is all that i have. i am giving this to you. (95)

In the same way that he slants the word motherfucker, he shows us the double meaning of *owning* something. In this case, the English language. He is owning the language in the sense that he is exploiting it through othering it—using it for his own means. His own story:

i am hoarding language. the english language. for a time when this english language. will be revoked. reclaimed. for when i will be told. that writing as i have is deemed a crime. (153)

And though he relishes in the pleasure of inventing his own language, by no means does he want to hold the exclusive rights to it. He welcomes others to consider how they are interpreting the language. How we would write our own language. To tell our own stories. He invites others into his house:

look inside. if you see something to your liking. take it. its yours. i want to arrive at nothing owned. do this. you would be doing me a favor. (236)

Young Americans by Jacqueline Frost Pamenar Press, 2022

Review by Katie Ebbitt

Young Americans, Jacqueline Frost’s second full-length collection of poems exists in temporal distinction. The text lives between the South and the West, braiding together Frost’s childhood in Lafayette, Louisiana with political uprising and organizing in Oakland, California.

The epistemological question of Frost’s work is emotional: questions focused on our relationship with the world. The political question she pushes is an existential one: how to be in the world. *Young Americans* focuses on how selfhood is often defined by the State and social expectation, the horror of conditions under capitalism and war, and the limited choices of “the bad signs we were born under.”

The first half of the book, an eponymous long poem, is divided into six parts. The poem references both Louisiana and California with the swampy stickiness of the South permeating throughout. Frost’s voice is often from the perspective of “we,” a community abstractly referenced, the stakes of which the speaker of the poem is attempting to understand. Frost writes,

I am asking: what is it you mean
by total freedom? I don’t know yet
what I’m willing to do for it.

The community referenced is one indelibly marked by violence and subsequently ruptured through trauma. There is a specific address to poor young men seen by the military as fodder for its forever wars

because in those
days / our boys / the boys who were a part of
me / of
my life / were the ones who went to the
slaughter / to
slaughter and be slaughtered / the smallest
most
forgettable generation of us /

And to the young women who

by being made for someone
who’s made for the war, I mean the collective
imperial
voluntary composed of all the common girls.

Young Americans speaks to how women have been conditioned to love and, within the confines of this love, are made incapable of living, their existence obliging them to find embodiment in the arms of a man. “Women” are made “good” through the right kind of allegiances. Frost’s speaker rejects this goodness. *Young Americans* considers the difficulties of being labeled “girl” and how to exist within language that doesn’t exist for you. About the young men going and returning from war, and the expectation of women to care for them. Frost’s narrator denounces our conditions as presented, understanding that gender can be whatever we make of it.

Frost interestingly uses language that harkens to Catholicism. It makes sense. Unlike other regions of the South, southern Louisiana is an area where Catholicism is not only the predominant religion, but has also worked its way into the majority of people’s practices and beliefs. In southern Louisiana, Cultural Catholicism is not simply a matter of theology; it weaves heritage, ritual, and linguistic tradition into the interactions of Cajuns, Creoles, and European Catholic peoples. This weaving, while not explicitly addressed by Frost, permeates the ethos of her writing. Frost’s narrator speaks to the implications of being raised in a specific community within the United States; differences in the life trajectory of childhood friends, the linkage that ties folks to rural communities.

The first section of *Young Americans* is indeed about that: the impact of trying to grow up in the US under a system that both makes and breaks you. Regardless of the transience that may occur across an individual’s lifetime, the mire of being raised in the South remains.

In the second portion of the book entitled, “You Have The Eyes of A Martyr” (first published in a slightly different iteration with O’Clock Press, 2013), Frost grapples with political and lumpen imprisonment. The work exists outside of linear time, a recording of action over a brief but intense period and looks at the conditions of imprisonment, offers a call for action, and considers the consequences of writing in a revolutionary context. Frost explores the desire to sustain engagement in the conditions presented to us, the ways our realities are impacted by the violence of the State, and the need for commune—to find place within commune—despite the tumult and costs often associated with dissonance. “Martyr” encourages a revelation, revolution. Frost’s voice within her writing has a smart type of honesty about experience and thinking about how one needs a radical movement to emancipate personal relationships.

Young Americans is contemplative and confessional, a look at the general problem of placing oneself within colonialism, the problem of being a product of a specific lineage, or our social contracting. The material reality we are given is an argument for revolutionary space—to combat seeing only from “the edge of our enclosures,” how we learn we are the surplus of Eden and open for punishment.

donors

Utopian (\$5,000 or more)

Anonymous (2), Cecily Brown, Copper Canyon Press, Mariposa Foundation, Penguin Random House, Tamaas

Outrider (\$1,000–\$4,999)

Anonymous (3), Haley Binn, Lori Bookstein, Stefania Bortolami, Lynn Cadwallader, Valerie Carberry, Rosemary Carroll, Rachel Chandler, Kyle DeWoody, Fairfax Dorn, Monique Erickson, Barrie Glabman, Molly B. Gross, Heather Ive, Vincent Katz, Katy Lederer, Brice & Helen Marden, Gina Nanni, Stephanie Newhouse, Tavia Nyong'o, Sayra Player, Meredith Rosen, Harper Simon, Jill Stuart, Arden S. Wohl

Radical (\$500–\$999)

Anonymous (3), Hope Atherton & Gavin Brown, Mei-mei Berssenbrugge, John Cappetta, Stephen Facey, Kate Fenner, Austin Fremont, Anna Gurton-Wachter, Pierre Joris & Nicole Peyrafitte, Nathan Kernan, Stephanie LaCava, Annabel Lee, Ricardo Alberto Maldonado, Greg Masters, Deborah Sale, Karen A. Weiser, Smitty Weygant

Experimental (\$100–\$499)

Anonymous (3), Alexis Farris Almeida, Aaron Anstett, Naomi S. Antonakos, Paul Auster, Jess M Barbagallo, Charles Bernstein & Susan Bee, David Berrigan, Sandy Berrigan, Star Black, Ed Bowes, Lee Bricetti, David Brody, Ann & Sam Charters, John Coletti, Beverly Corbett, Peter Covino, Charlotte Daley, Donna Dennis, Marcella Durand, Stephen Facey, Nina Feinberg, Jennifer Firestone, Maura Fitzpatrick, Raymond Foye, Suzan Frecon, Ed Friedman, Cliff Fyman, Brianne Garcia, Laia Garcia-Furtado, Alan Gilbert, Peter Gizzi, John Godfrey, Tara Goodrich, Mimi Gross, Michael Heller, Debra Holian, in memoriam Kenward Elmslie, Bob Holman, Erica Hunt, Joan Jonas, Constantine Jones, Alystyre Julian, Candace N Keirns, Florence Kindel, Larry Fagin (in memoriam), Gerald Koonce, La MaMa, Pamela Lawton, Zoe Leonard, Jeffrey Lependorf, Rachel Levitsky, Kimberly Lyons, Felicia Mayro, E.J. McAdams, Nikhil Melnychuk, Fred Moten, Stephen Motika, Eileen Myles, Laura Nicoll, Charles L North, Tess O'Dwyer, Deborah Paredez, Richard Kraft and Lisa Pearson, Roland Pease, Jeffrey Pethybridge, Zac Posen, Carolyn Ramo, Lynne Sachs, Metta Sáma, Ilka Scobie, Purvi Shah, Evie Shockley, Ann Stephenson, Lee Stockdale, Maya Suess, Matthew Sweeney, Meg Tansey, Anne Tardos, Steven Taylor, Tony Torn, Judith Upjohn, Anne Waldman, Rosmarie Waldrop, Lewis Warsh, Jo Ann Wasserman, Dara Wier, Nina Yo

Wild (\$0–\$99)

Anonymous (60), Megan Adams, Marianne Aerni, Elsa Aleluia, Kimberly Alidio, Leslie L. Allison, Arielle Angel, Monica Claire Antonie, Sophie Appel, Lee-Ann Azzopardi, Noah Baen, Elizabeth Batson, Marie-Helene Bertino, Chris Bohn, Gregory Botts, Liz Bowen, Laynie Browne, Marie Buck, Reed Bye, Kim Campi, M Carson, Shelley Carter, Lori Cheatle, Cecily Chen, Jackie Clark, Anastasia Clarke, Barnett Cohen, Sarah Cowan, Maria Damon, Beth Day, Risa Denenberg, mai c. doan, Corinne Donly, Mary Dooley, Kate Doyle, Lynne Dreyer, Katie Ebbitt, Herb Elbern, Herb & Amy Erickson, Patricia Fabricant, Nadine Faraj, Lisa Ferguson, Beth Fertig, Larry Flood, Allen Frame, Jeannette Garceau, Sascha Goldhor, Gia Gonzales, Jenny Grassl, Jan-Henry Gray, Kate Greene, Whit P Griffin, Phillip L Griffith, Carle Groome, Joan Grossman, Bob Koshin Hanson, Raed Hawa, HL Hazuka, Sue Heinemann, Pepe Hinojosa, Michael Honigberg, Nicole Houser, Susan Howard, Daonne Huff, Emily Hunt, Bo Hwang, Cindy Hwang, Maite Iracheta, Katherine Jackson, Jonas Jonasson, Erin Lee Jones, Kamikaze Jones, Janet Kaplan, Marie Christine Katz, Anna Kay, Martha Keith, Alan Kleiman, Kate Krauss, Margaux Kristjansson, Raj Kumar Lakhi Kant, Krystal Languell, Katherine Liberovskaya, Eugene Lim, Anna Limontas-Salisbury, Maria Lino, John LoCicero, Sara Lopez, Andrea Louie, Janice A. Lowe, Sara Lyons, Velina Manolova, Shelley Marlow, Alisha Mascarenhas, Emily Maynor, Sula McAuley, Bonner McCollum, Crystal McFeetors, Rangi Lamar McNeil, Marina Metalios, Rachel Milligan, Myra Mniewski, Tyler Morse, Dave Morse, Rich Mudge, Peter Myers, Debra Nadolney, Ralph Nazareth, Chris Nealon, Elissa Oberman, Rich O'Russa, Rochelle Owens, in memoriam George Economou; Amanda Parmer, KT Pe Benito, Douglas Perry, Maxine Phillips, Roxi Power Hamilton, Nathlie Provosty, Eric Rasmussen, Ted Reichman, Ariana Reines, Joan Retallack, JR Reynolds, Deborah Risenstein, Serge Rodriguez, in memoriam LL Gimeno; Lacey Romano, Frank Rubino, Aidan Ryan, Wing Yan Sang, Susan Seizer, anne lesley selcer, Maya Seuss, Klare Shaw, Steven Shulman, Regina Siglain, Cedar Sigo, Richard Skurdall, Susan Slesinger, Raia Small, Alexa Smith, Marc Solomon, Debra Blair Solovy, Bill Spears, Patricia Spears Jones, hayley stahl, Bridget Talone, Harold Teichman, Jess Tell, Caitlyn Tella, Chloe Thompson, Rachele Toarmino, Hannah Treasure, Linda Umans, Morgan Vó, Robert Ward, Jenna Weiss, Francis Weiss Rabkin, Tyrone Williams, Terence P. Winch

POETRY PROJECT NEWSLETTER #269

SUMMER 2022

FREE

REMEMBRANCES **Kenward Elmslie (1929–2022)** // INTERVIEW **Amanda Monti** by Lillian Paige Walton // POETRY **Terrence Arjoon, Simone White** // PORTFOLIO **I am climbing the stairs that I create...** poems from the Prison & Justice Writing Program // ESSAY **Grails on Fire** by James Barickman // REVIEWS Rebecca Teich on **The Pasolini Book** by Stacy Szymaszek, Vani Natarajan on **Villainy** by Andrea Abi-Karam, Rob Halpern on **Sousveillance Pageant** by Emily Abendroth, Zach Ozma on **Chasers** by Stephen Ira, imogen xtian smith on **Phone Bells Keep Ringing for Me** by Choi Seungja, Kirby Mages on **book of the other: small in comparison** by Truong Tran, Katie Ebbit on **Young Americans** by Jackqueline Frost

: = = . =/ _ - ~ _) * ^ _ , ; _ ~ ^ ,